Galumphing English: Language on a wording spree

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Roald Dahl's English teacher once wrote on his school report, "I have never met anybody who so persistently writes words meaning the exact opposite of what is intended." The schoolmaster would have expressed greater consternation had he lived to see the children's books Dahl wrote later in life. Not only did the characters in his stories use words differently, but they also invented entirely new ones. 'Gloriumptious', a portmanteau of glorious and scrumptious, is one of my favourites.

'Portmanteau' originally meant a travelling case with two parts joined by a hinge. It was redefined by Lewis Carroll to describe a word formed by hinging together two pre-existing ones. He knew what he was talking about, because he had invented quite a few hinged words himself. In Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass, Alice comes across a rather puzzling poem called Jabberwocky. Trying to make sense of it, she approaches Humpty Dumpty for enlightenment.

"Let's hear it", says Humpty. "I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

This sounds very hopeful, so Alice repeats the first verse:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
   Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
   And the mome raths outgrabe.

Mr Dumpty replies, "Well, 'slithy' means 'lithe and slimy'… You see it's like a portmanteau — there are two meanings packed up into one word…" He also explains to alice that 'mimsy', in a similar way, means 'flimsy and miserable'. These are not the only portmanteau words introduced by Carroll. Of the ones we continue to use today, there is galumph, a blend of 'gallop' and 'triumph'; and chortle, a combination of 'chuckle' and 'snort'. Many of these are nonce words created for the one-time use of fleshing out the nonsense verse of Jabberwocky – so it's a wonder that a few of them caught on and are still in currency.

Dahl's teacher would have become apoplectic if he had realized that the great William Shakespeare himself made up words. Shakespeare was a man with a big vocabulary – he used more than 17,677 different words in his plays, sonnets and narrative poems. We all make his praise (which, by the way, is an anagram of William Shakespeare) so people might be shocked to hear that more than 1,700 of those words were neologisms: i.e., the bard made up around ten percent of his vocabulary! These include words that range from the everyday – bump, lonely and road – to the slightly less so – assassination, gnarled and sanctimonious – not to mention the ones – like 'anthropophaginian', meaning cannibal – that were not a hit with the public. Mind you, Shakespeare did not necessarily pull all these words out of thin air (though some of them he might have): They could have been part of the street vocabulary of the time

and his contribution would have been to usher them into the printed page and onto the stage.

The playwright invented phrases as well. And the phrases gave new meaning to the words they were made up of. There is an apocryphal story about a student who went to see a Shakespeare play and came out of it saying that his work was full of clichés. The truth is that the words the writer gave a fresh spin to through newly-minted phrases only became clichés later because of their abiding popularity.

To quote 'the cunning linguist' Richard Lederer, "If you have seen better days in your salad days, when you wore your heart on your sleeve… if you break the ice with one fell swoop, if you never stand on ceremonies… if you are more sinned against than sinning because you have been eaten out of house and home by your own flesh and blood (the most unkindest cut of all), if you haven't slept a wink and are breathing your last because you're in a pickle, if you carry within you the milk of human kindness and a heart of gold (even though you know that all that glisters is not gold), if you laugh yourself into stitches at too much of a good thing, if you make a virtue of necessity, if you know that the course of true love never did run smooth, and if you won't budge an inch — why, if the truth be told and the truth will out, what the dickens… you are, as luck would have it, standing on that tower of strength of phrasemakers, William Shakespeare."

In the period that Shakespeare wrote, the sixteenth century, English went from being a relatively simple language to a more nuanced vocabulary-rich one. This was fuelled in part by the introduction of the printing press just a century earlier, creating an unprecedented demand for and consequent growth in the supply of words. Of course, the word-making bug bit writers long before the printing press or Shakespeare. As early as the 14th century, Chaucer, the father of English literature, introduced new-fangled words into the language – 'new-fangled' being one of them. But, without a doubt, Shakespeare was the most prolific manufacturer of words.

From the 17th century, colonization gave a boost to the language. English swallowed words from the various tongues of the vast British Empire and made them its own. India was one of the big contributors: Two percent of the words in the Oxford English Dictionary are of Indian origin. There are the obvious ones that are easy to spot by Indians as their own: Avatar, chutney, cummerbund, pukka, pundit, pyjamas, swastika… They have passed into English virtually unchanged from their original forms. A little less obvious (at least to me) would be words like bandana (baandhna in Hindi), bangle (bangli in Hindi), catamaran (kattumaram in Tamil), cot (khat, Hindi), cushy (khushi, Hindi), juggernaut (Jagannath, another name of the Hindu deity Krishna), pariah (paraiyar, a caste of hereditary drummers in Tamil), shampoo (champi, Hindi) and thug (thag, Hindi).

Indian place names have a history of being turned into English words – Jodhpurs, Cashmere and Dungaree (based on Jodhpur, Kashmir and Dongri—an area of Mumbai), to name a few. But the most recent example, Bangalore, is unique in that the coinage took place offshore – which is apt given its meaning. Invented by an American, the phrase 'getting Bangalored' means losing your job because it got outsourced to an offshore location. While your job could be outsourced to many different cities in India, or indeed to other countries as well, it is Bangalore that gets the distinction (or ignominy) of being associated with this phenomenon. Bangalore is also the name given to a tube stuffed with explosives that was invented in that city. The Bangalore torpedo was used by troops in both world wars to blow up wire entanglements. While the noun associated with the city has a violent association, the verb has the misfortune of joining this exclusive list of three city-name-based-verbs: Bangalored, Shanghaied and Sodomized.

While the Indian influence on English may have started with colonization it by no means ended with the demise of the empire. Indians continue to add their own masala to the language. Take the word 'prepone': It has recently found its way into the Oxford English Dictionary. 'Postpone' is a well-established word formed with the suffix 'post', which many of us know to mean 'after', along with 'pone' which comes from a Latin word that means 'to put'. If you can postpone, why can you not prepone? In the seventies, Indians decided that you could. So what if it wasn't in the dictionary? Instead of advancing or bringing forward event timings or rescheduling them to an earlier slot, they simply started preponing them. Having postponed the official recognition of this neologism by three decades, dictionaries have finally blessed it. While

'prepone' may or may not catch on elsewhere in the English-speaking world, its use by millions of English-speaking Indians is good enough to grant it legitimacy.

Certain English words have become a part of the everyday vocabulary of Indians not only when they speak English, but also their mother tongue. 'Adjust' is one such word. It is a by-product of our population explosion. On trains, buses and in public waiting areas, seats seem to be perpetually full. But all you have to do is to ask the occupants to 'please adjust' and they will slide their bums over to make space for you.

Something Indians seem to do a lot is 'timepass'— passing the time doing nothing much at all. We often watch a 'timepass' movie – not a great film, but a mildly entertaining one. Which is why we must relieve our boredom by having 'timepass' snacks. But, as any good 'Desi' would tell you, you shouldn't 'take tension', however 'timepass' your existence may be. After all, stress kills. And who would want to be 'off' prematurely? 'Off' being the polite way, apparently, of saying 'dead' in Hindi. (In Bambaiya Hindi at any rate, that curious dialect prevalent in Mumbai.) It's almost as if we were human appliances and one day, just like that, we are switched off.

More people speak English in South Asia than in Britain and North America combined, with India alone accounting for over 250 million Anglophones. Add to that India's spreading diaspora and growing soft power and perhaps we are looking at cashmere-sporting Londoners asking each other to 'please adjust' on the tube so they can reach their preponed meetings on time in order to avoid getting Bangalored.

While India may be one of the biggest exporters to the English language – past and present – it is by no means the only one. Alcohol (Arabic, ironically), boomerang (Native Australian), ketchup (Malay) and tattoo (Tahitian) are just a few of the words fished by English from a diverse pool. Though these word annexations were all a by-product of colonization, there are other world events that have contributed to the language as well: Glasnost and perestroika are two Russian words that found their way into the language in the mid eighties. Meaning, respectively, openness and restructuring, they were the watchwords of Gorbachev as he strove to liberalize the Soviet Union. The shake-up caused tremors around the world. Overnight, glasnost and perestroika became household words in English and other languages. But with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these words are now virtually forgotten. Such is the fickleness of vocabulary.

English has also developed by altering the significance of existing words. A word that is born with a specific meaning often changes a great deal as it grows up and grows old. A 'moment', in medieval Europe, meant exactly ninety seconds. Over time the word lost its precision and, as we know, it now refers to any short but unspecified amount of time. Haggard, allure, arouse, pounce and gorge are all words that derive from falconry. 'Haggard', for example, was the adjective used to describe an adult falcon that had been captured from the wild. But, along with the other words on the list, it lost its specificity and is applied today to life in general.

Sometimes meanings change so much over time that words end up signifying quite the opposite of what they originally did. 'Nice', for instance, used to mean

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'silly'. 'Silly' meant 'worthy'. 'Awful' meant 'awesome'. 'Senile' referred to old age in general and not only to dementia. 'Peruse' has classically been used to mean 'to read thoroughly'. But, increasingly, it is used to mean 'to skim over'. While this has not yet been accepted as the formal definition of the word, some day it well might. After all, language evolves by regularizing

mistakes that recur time and again: 'free reign', 'just desserts', 'straight-laced' and 'vocal chords' are common distortions of 'free rein', 'just deserts', 'strait-laced' and 'vocal cords', respectively. There is something almost logical about these erroneous substitutions with homophones – which would explain the frequency of their occurrence. They too may soon become the norm.

American English, oxymoron though it may be, has had an undeniable impact on language. An Americanism that started out as a bit of a joke 175 years

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ago is one of the most frequently used words in English today. It has also been adopted by virtually every other language under the sun. I am talking about 'OK': Its first known appearance in print was in the Boston Morning Post on March 23, 1839, as a deliberately misspelt initialism of 'all correct'. Just as we have 'LOL', 'YOLO' and 'OMG' today, in 1930s New England there was a fad of creating initialisms. The New Englanders went a step further than the initialisers of today and used the first letters of humorous misspellings: 'NSMJ' for

''nough said 'mong jentlemen', 'OR' for 'oll rong' and 'OK' for 'oll korrect'. While the other coinages faded away, OK got a boost because it coincided with the initialism for 'Old Kinderhook', a nickname of the eighth US president, Martin Van Buren. Kinderhook was the birthplace of Van Buren, and a Democratic outfit called the Old Kinderhook Club that supported Van Buren used 'OK' as a rallying cry during his 1840 campaign.

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Certain words outlive technological obsolescence. We still talk about dialling numbers, though we have long stopped rotating the dial, the circular disk on old telephones. Instead, we now tap out numbers on our touch screens. Remember the Hitchcock classic, Dial M For Murder? If we wanted to be technologically up-to-date, we would now have to call it Tap M For Murder. But that wouldn't have the same ring, would it? Let's see how long 'app' and 'hashtag' live – as long as 'dialling' or 'OK', middling like 'floppy disk' or a brief candle like 'anthropophaginian'?

The neologism of the day is 'selfie'. The term, used to describe self-portraits taken with a camera phone and shared on social media, first appeared around 2005. But it is in 2012 that it became popular and was named by Time magazine as one of the year's top ten buzzwords. In 2013, it was announced as the word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary. While selfies are most popular amongst teenage girls, they have also been taken by astronauts in space and even by a crested black macaque on a camera stolen from a wildlife photographer.

Being an advertising professional, something one is acutely aware of is brand names turning into generic

words. Nowadays we all Google stuff and we have been blithely Xeroxing for decades. But it might shock you to know that Heroin was a brand of cough remedy marketed a century ago. Bubble Wrap is a trademark of the Sealed Air Corporation. Band-Aid, Frisbee, Ouija Board, Ping Pong, Post-it, Styrofoam and Velcro are all brand names too. 'Realtors', now used to refer to all real estate agents, is actually a trademark. The word 'dependability'—I bet you didn't know this—was coined and used in the 1900s by the Dodge Brothers in their car ads.

Indian advertising has done its bit for language: It has introduced 'Hinglish' words like 'ullu-banawing'. This word has been popularized by an ad campaign for a mobile network. The campaign shows the usual suspects, politicians and taxi drivers, trying to fool the public. (Perhaps they should have featured an ad man as well!) Ullu-banawing has its own hashtag on Twitter and, in these times, any coinage that is frequently placed after the # symbol has a good chance of showing up in a dictionary.

'Upto' may soon become 'legit' as well. 'Up' and 'to' are two separate words. Joining them is wrong. 'Desi' advertisements that announce prices upto 10-, 25- or 50% off are, therefore, 100% off the mark. But then again, perhaps, as we speak, the rules are being rewritten.

Is there right and wrong in the reinvention of words? George Orwell was against the deliberate distortion of meaning, especially by politicians. "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity," he believed. He compared duplicitous government officials to "cuttlefish squirting out ink. He wrote, "Things like the continuance of British rule in India… can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face… Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification." Examples of Orwellian doublespeak in use today include 'downsizing' instead of firing people, 'pre-emptive strike' instead of unprovoked attack and 'enhanced interrogation' instead of torture.

In Through the Looking-Glass, Humpty Dumpty says to Alice in a scornful tone, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," Alice replies, "whether you can make words mean so many things." Like Alice, Orwell would probably have disagreed with the egg. He might, on the other hand, have agreed with Ambrose Bierce, the nineteenth century American cynic. Bierce wrote The Devil's Dictionary, which provided accurate if cynical definitions of words. He defined cynics such as himself as blackguards whose faulty vision allows them to see things as they are. He described a dentist as a magician who, putting metal in your mouth, pulls coins out of your pocket. And, my favourite: a saint as a dead sinner revised and edited.

English is, at the end of the day, a gloriumptious cocktail of words, old and new, imported and indigenous, literary and street. It has a life of its own and it certainly gets around – more so than most other languages. Dorothy Thompson called it 'that glorious and imperial mongrel'. It hasn't gotten where it has by being pure. It is arguably the language with the largest vocabulary, larger than the word count of French, for example. One reason for this is the dedication of the French Academy to keeping foreign and other 'inappropriate' expressions out. English has no equivalent institution. So if a purist objects to borrowed, distorted, made-up or unorthodox words, the English language might just quote the Bhangra Muffins from the British Asian television show 'Goodness Gracious Me' and say to her, "Kiss my chuddies, man!"

Word.