SILLY LINGUISTICS

THE MAGAZINE FOR LANGUAGE LOVERS



A Rose Apple by Any Other Name Wouldn't Sell

The Linguistics of Fruit

THE MAGAZINE FOR LANGUAGE LOVERS : ISSUE #94 : MARCH 2026

Table of Contents

03 Steve's Corner - March 2026

04 What's on February 14th? March 8th! Names, reference and meaning.
By Neda Stefanović

07 The Meaning of Words Isn't Always What It Seems
By Brandy Cross

16 The Force Multiplier in Digitalizing the Welsh Language?
By Patricia Syner

18 Stroke, Syntax, and the Strange Survival of Swearing
By Joana Atanasova

23 Japanese Gender & Pronouns II: Youth and Gender Exploration
By Caboshone

28 A Rose Apple by Any Other Name Wouldn't Sell: The Linguistics of Fruit
By Laura Rikono

Cover photo by Jo Sonn and content page photo by Katya Azimova
This week's page numbers are in Welsh!


California gets its name from a 16th century Spanish novel Las sergas de Esplandián
In the novel, an island called California is ruled by a Queen Calafia
Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, the author of the book, probably derived the name from the Arabic word Khalif
Steve the vagabond

7 8 9

BY NEDA STEFANOVIĆ

13 14 15

WHAT'S ON FEBRUARY 14TH?

March 8th! Names, reference and meaning.

19 20 21

There is a viral video (and these videos can be pretty funny, although they remain somewhat problematic, as they can lead us to treat a person in them as a form of entertainment while forgetting they are still just human beings) in which someone asks people if they know what holiday falls on February 14th. One person confidently responds: „March 8th!“

In their defence, March 8th *is* the holiday, as in Serbian we rarely use the term *Women's Day*, and usually refer to it simply by the date. The conversation seems silly, but, from a linguistic point of view, it is interesting to observe the extent to which our brains can accept names or titles without even recognizing their literal meaning until it is pointed out; simply accepting them as they are.

There is another viral video, in which a child is asked whether they know who Saint Nicholas is, and they respond: „Yes, Saint Nicholas is... Saint Sava!“ These are arguably the two most famous saints in Serbian tradition, but of the two, Saint Sava is the one kids are more familiar with, as he is celebrated as the patron saint of schools. They share many characteristics, as all saints probably do, but a small child likely knows their names as vague labels rather than as references to distinct individuals.

Another interesting mix-up happens quite often with the brand names that became so popular upon appearing on the market, especially if they were the first of their kind, that the entire type of product became known by the brand name. So, people may talk about their favorite brand of *smoki*, although „Smoki“ is actually just the most famous brand of flips, and in certain areas they would ask for a *paloma*, although they would probably accept any kind of tissues, and not be particular about the brand.

When a child is only starting to acquire language, overcategorization and undercategorization are quite common. They may think that a word refers to a broader or narrower set of referents: for example, they might believe that „dog“ refers to all four-legged animals, or they could believe it refers only to their own family dog. It seems that the same process can keep happening even when we are adults who are quite skilled in the language use. As we learn new words, we always try to figure out the scope and nuance of its meaning, which can be easier if we encounter a new word in conversation and see the object it refers to immediately, or more difficult if we encounter it while reading, for example, and if it has a more abstract meaning.

We may believe to understand and even use certain sayings and expressions without really examining the meaning of their parts and their literal meaning as a whole. This probably happens because we expect such sentences to have somewhat obscure meaning, so we don't burden ourselves too much with getting to the bottom of what they mean exactly. There was an amusing story shared on the internet about the man who believed the popular saying to be: „Knowledge is power, France is bacon“, and used it because he liked the meaning of the first part, while trying to understand in which metaphorical sense does the second

part relate to the same idea, before learning that the saying is just quoted with the name of its author, Francis Bacon.

This is also quite common with the song lyrics we sing incorrectly. We just accept what we hear, although we often realize how absurd it sounded once we learn the correct words. However, since we know that the artists often take artistic libertis in writing lyrics, we don't expect them to always be easy to understand and close to everyday language. That is why these contexts are particularly suitable for similar phenomena.

The reasons behind the occurance of these phenomena differ. On the sentence level, as in sayings or song lyrics, the phonetic quality of sounds greatly influences misheard and misunderstood expressions, whereas this aspect of language processing plays no role in wrongly attributed names. However, all of these cases occur because we set aside our need for deeper understing of meaning, for different reasons, and accept the string of sounds as we first encounter it.

Our brains can often seek meaning even where it is difficult to find, as we are cognitively inclined to do so in general: to try and find patterns and make sense of the information we receive. However, as we see here, they can also do quite the opposite, and overlook the meaning if they deem it unneccessary: for example, if it seems to be related to etymology, or if it seems metaphorical or poetical, and, in general, if it doesn't seem essential for the conversation to function smoothly. The scope and types of manifestation of this phenomena remain to be studied more extensively, as they can offer a more nuanced picture of the cognitive processes behind our use of language.

THE MEANING OF WORDS ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT IT SEEMS

By Brandy Cross

English is full of words that don't quite make sense, at least at first glance. Take George Carlin's famous comedy bit:

"Why do we park on a driveway but drive on a parkway?" _ George Carlin

I'll give you a moment to laugh, it is funny.

The truth is, language drift explains everything. It's not that funny when you really think about it.

And yes, this is going to be a blog about spoiling word jokes, misunderstandings surrounding English words, and then a bit more. If that sounds like it ruins the mystique of a good joke to you, probably stop reading here.

However, that same history and background information can be fascinating. Often, it's about words changing based on (time and place) local context and then later losing that context.

For example, the word park is of Germanic origin, meaning fence. It moved into English through old French (parc) and German (pferch). The first went on to become "Park" and the latter went on to become pen (pigpen) and fold (to cover or wrap something).

From about 450 CE, British commoners had access to land that was known as commons. This happened as Anglo Saxon invaders seized land and parceled it out amongst themselves. Large allotments of land were handed to the lord of the parcel or manor. These were then independently divided between each household, with a haga (a private garden) for each home. In addition, a large main field was shared out amongst the village, with allotments per household plus access rights to the forest for harvesting timber, keeping pigs, and sometimes even to hunt.

That "commons" system held until the 14th-17th centuries, where a series of reforms turned that land over to local nobility and wealthy landowners. The first of those I am aware of was the Statute of Merton in 1235, which privatized local fields, literally handing them over to wealthy landowners for use to graze sheep. The "enclosure" of the commons continued across the country, sparking a series of revolts. The 1381 Peasants Revolt, Jack Kade's rebellion of 1450, Kett's rebellion of 1549, and Captain Pouch revolts of 1604-1607 all cited land access as major demands. In the latter, terms like "digger" and "leveler" referred to individuals who dug under fences or flattened them completely.

All of this was, of course, legitimized by the dominant idea that the poor were not good at managing land for themselves. As John Hales said in 1581, *"that which is possessed of manie in common is neglected by all."*

Those "enclosed" commons quickly took on another name, which, was park. A word that meant "enclosed" or "fenced". The word quickly went on to become a term to refer to the land inside those fences, set aside to preserve forest or game, to be used for hunting, riding, and ornament (if you were privileged to access it).

The park was born.

By the 1700s, mercantilism and capitalism had greatly increased the number of people wealthy enough to own carriages for leisure and transport. Green spaces were popular destinations for the leisure class, and those same socialites would often store their carriages and coaches on the green, especially when walking in said gardens. The word came to refer to the act of storing a vehicle, with an accompanying verb "parking".

Parkway itself is an amalgamation of "park" (green space for recreation) and "driveway". Here, it first came into play in the 19th century as landscape architects (urban planners in today's language), most notably Frederick Olmstead, tried to design greener and more beautiful cities. Designs included setbacks alongside roads to create separate lanes for pedestrians, cyclists, equestrians, and carriages. The setback was a green space, typically lined with trees. A way by a park. Today, parkway refers to any road lined by a green belt of land. Though it's not a protected term and you'll sometimes see it slapped onto just any old road.

That was a lot of words to explain a 20-year-old joke right? But, this is a case of English using multiple very distinct words, which both descend from the same root, but branching off based in contextual changes in language use.

Stories like this are all too common. It's pretty normal for any language to build up meaning around a word and then, when the original meaning is lost, it becomes contextually difficult to explain.

One of my favorite examples is this 2020 Twitter post:



Let's take a look at a few more fun ones:

Would a fly that loses its wings be called a "walk?" – No, because the word "fly" for the insect is separate from the word "fly" meaning to move through the air. Flies are etymologically descended from the Old English word flēoge (the insect) and the word fly (to move through the air) descends from flēogan. Clearly the same root (cognates) but different words.

If flying is so safe, why is the airport called 'terminal'? – Well, terminal means end-point. It's not even language drift.

Why do overlook and oversee mean opposite things? – Originally, overlook also meant "to examine carefully". However, it also meant to view from a high place, meaning you're far away and you miss a lot of details. As the word became more and more linked with viewing from a battlement, it became more and more linked with distance. The word "oversee" conversely stems from Old English ofersēon, to observe, survey or see, or to neglect and to despise. These words were probably first used interchangeably and then as overlook came to be used for lords and nobility and oversee for field mangers, the terms switched meanings.

If horrific is akin to horrible, why isn't terrific akin to terrible? – Because the word terrific drifted in meaning. Terrific stems from the root Latin Terrere, to frighten (terror causing). This was used as a direct synonym to awesome (to cause awe) in the context of the Christian church. All of those words (magnificent, awesome, terrific, sublime) shifted meaning as the concept of the Christian god moved from one of terror to the modern concept of a gentler god. That, compared with the human tendency to use hyperbole, and the terror-causing quickly moves to be merely a superlative.

All of those examples have things in common. They're all either related (such as horrible and horrific) or they simply drifted in meaning over time.

However, the English language can also be confusing for other reasons. For example, we have plenty of false cognates (where words look like they have the same root, but they don't)

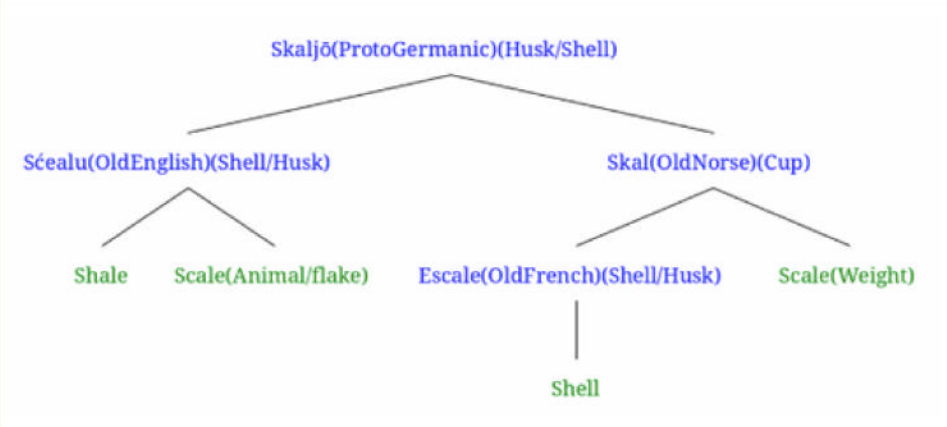
Why is the man who invests all your money called a broker? – Broker is descended from Anglo-Norman French, brocour. Essentially, it replaced the existing Old English words pedlar (a seller of goods) and monger (a dealer or seller in a specific commodity) from daily English. You still see it in modern English as real estate broker and stock broker, and monger, as I've recently learned, in Maltese English (a vendor).

On ther other hand, "broke" descends from the Old English/German Brecan/breken/Brechen (one of which is still used in Dutch) meaning. It's also from the same root as bray, the sound donkeys make. This term was roughly used to mean to fracture or crack, which then was popularized in the sense of the Christian bible (to break one's spirit) and from there transformed into a word meaning to be broken as in "to be rendered helpless or ill". In the 1600s, the term began to be associated with money when the term "break the bank" arose to refer to when a gambler won more money than the house could afford to pay.

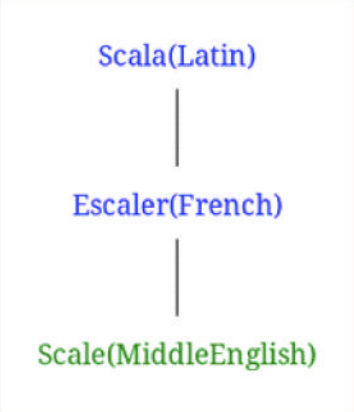
Or the word scale, which comes in three completely separate variants:

- Scale, to climb, stemming from Latin scala (ladder)
- Scale, a device to measure weight or length (skal, a drinking vessel that was commonly used as a unit of weight)
- Scale, the exterior plating of fish and many reptiles, from Old French escale (shell/husk)

All three appear to be related, but that also gets pretty complicated if you go back far enough (words in green are in modern English):



Then compare that to the relatively simple progression of the word scale (to climb):



Cognates (words descended from the same root) and (false) cognates mean that sometimes words look like they mean one thing when they might mean something entirely different. Sometimes that's also a result of idiom and metaphor, which might be lost as language drifts. For example, in the case of buttress, which shifted from being a metaphor about supporting something from the architectural term to being its own word meaning such.

Or take man, as in mankind, human.

I recently read Formations of Belief, a collection of essays edited by Philip Nord, and ran across a pet peeve of mine. Multiple authors quoted "man" as a gendered term and suggested that we use ungendered alternatives like "people".

Man, of course, coming from the root "man-" from proto-indo-european, means people. In fact, Old English used wer to mean male and wif to mean female. Wif as in wife is still present in modern English. Words like gumo and gome (which meant man and come from Old English) are still found in words like bridgegroom

In older stages of English, goon, weld, arrai, iholden and werre (werewolf) were all used to refer to "a male of the human race". Over time, that shifted, probably especially in relation to words like liegeman, holdman, steerman, alderman, etc. People were referred to by their

profession with “man” on the end, leading to requesting “men” instead of laborers and soldiers, leading this significantly male workforce to shift the usage of the name.

More importantly, you can see that same pattern in other languages. For example, in romance languages, the root word “homo” almost universally shifted to mean simply “male”. E.g., Hombre, homme, homen, uomo. Language shifts occur based on the context of the words and where they are used which can become confusing when those original contexts no longer exist or aren't as common.

Cultural shifts also mean that we can lose the contexts for ideas. Even when those ideas were major influences on society at the time. Another concept, the idea of “immortalized in song and verse” is also alien to most modern readers.

Take Sonnet 18, probably one of the most famous poems out there:



Shall I compare thee to a winter’s day?
Rough winds do shake the buds of may
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines
And often is his gold complexion dimmed
And every fair from fair sometimes declines
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair which thou owst
Nor shall death brag thou wanderst in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou growst
So long as men can breathe and eyes can see
So long lives this and this gives life to thee

Ah yes, I could compare you to a summer’s day, it’s beautiful – but then the weather’s not always perfect, the sun is hot the wind is harsh and every summer comes to an end. And you, here you are, far more perfect, only being immortalized in the written word, by my pen, could ever do you justice.

The interesting thing about that little bit of what sounds like ego is that it was actually the common belief at the time that being preserved in writing preserved the record of you for all eternity. After all, the works of Herodotus, Aristotle, and Plato were so renowned as to shape the education of every modern man at the time. The concept of writing for pleasure, writing to be thrown away, writing where a book sells an average of just 2,500 copies before being

consigned to be forgotten forever was unknown to Shakespeare. His statement is merely that he has written about his paramour and therefore they will be remembered for all time, not because he wrote it but because it was written down.

Or, take “One Day I Wrote Her Name” better known as Sonnet 75 by Edmund Spenser,

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
“Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize;
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eke my name be wiped out likewise.”
“Not so,” (quoth I) “let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

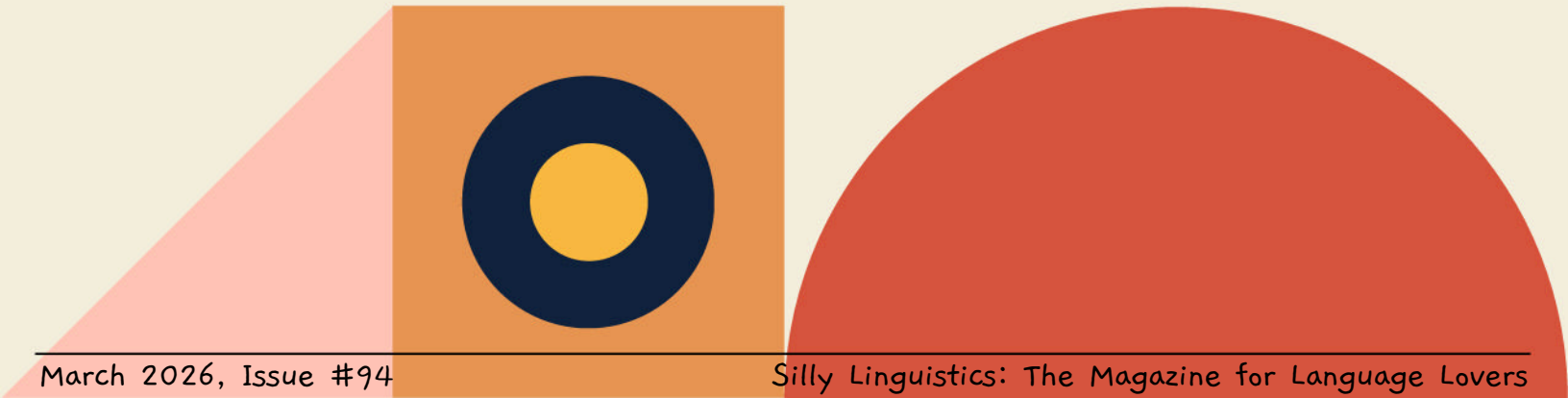
Or, again, Shakespeare, with Sonnet 55:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
’Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.



Compare to today, where words are so much cheap trash to be thrown away, and the impact of that steadfast believe that something you wrote today would be read not just now but 1000 years in the future, is gone. The Greek temples sunk and broken, while the words of Aristotle live on.

Where now is Regulus, or Romulus, or Remus? Primordial Rome abides only in its name; we hold only naked names.



THE FORCE MULTIPLIER IN DIGITALIZING THE WELSH LANGUAGE?

By Patricia Syner

The people of Wales have a goal. At present, between only 18-30% of Wales speak Welsh. The goal of the people of Wales is to reach one million speakers by 2050. This beautiful almost poetic language is recognized along side English, but how would they go about achieving this lofty goal.

They would need to digitalize their texts so they could be read by computers. This would require creating computer systems that could read their language as easy as English is read by technology. They would need large data sets to complete this task.



What are some tasks they would need to accomplish to achieve this goal? They would want the language to be available for speech-to-text. If you were one of those who prefer speech over typing, then dictation would need to be available. If they wanted textbooks then they would need text to speech also available. They would also need accurate computer translation. They would need a program that would help you learn the language. How about Duolingo? It is free and offers over forty languages (including the fictional Klingon). It does include Welsh and in just a few minutes I was able to learn Nos da, which means good night, but did you ever think about who creates Duolingo?

According to Duolingo, they originally used volunteer experts, native speakers and learned scholars in the creation of their courses but as of late it has become apparent that AI-assisted content allowed for more accuracy and less errors,

The people of Wales needed some way to aid teachers in creating lesson plans and educational materials, to assure accuracy in translation, and to make sure this technology is available to all. After exploring all the tools available to them, it turns out that AI is the valuable tool used by Duolingo. Could AI be the Force Multiplier they needed? It runs out that it was. Thanks to AI, one can now learn Welsh at the touch of a button, and they have the digital presence that allows them to accomplish all these tasks and so much more. Now they are on their way to completing the task of one million speakers by 2050.

The people of Wales have broken their goal into three main parts[1].

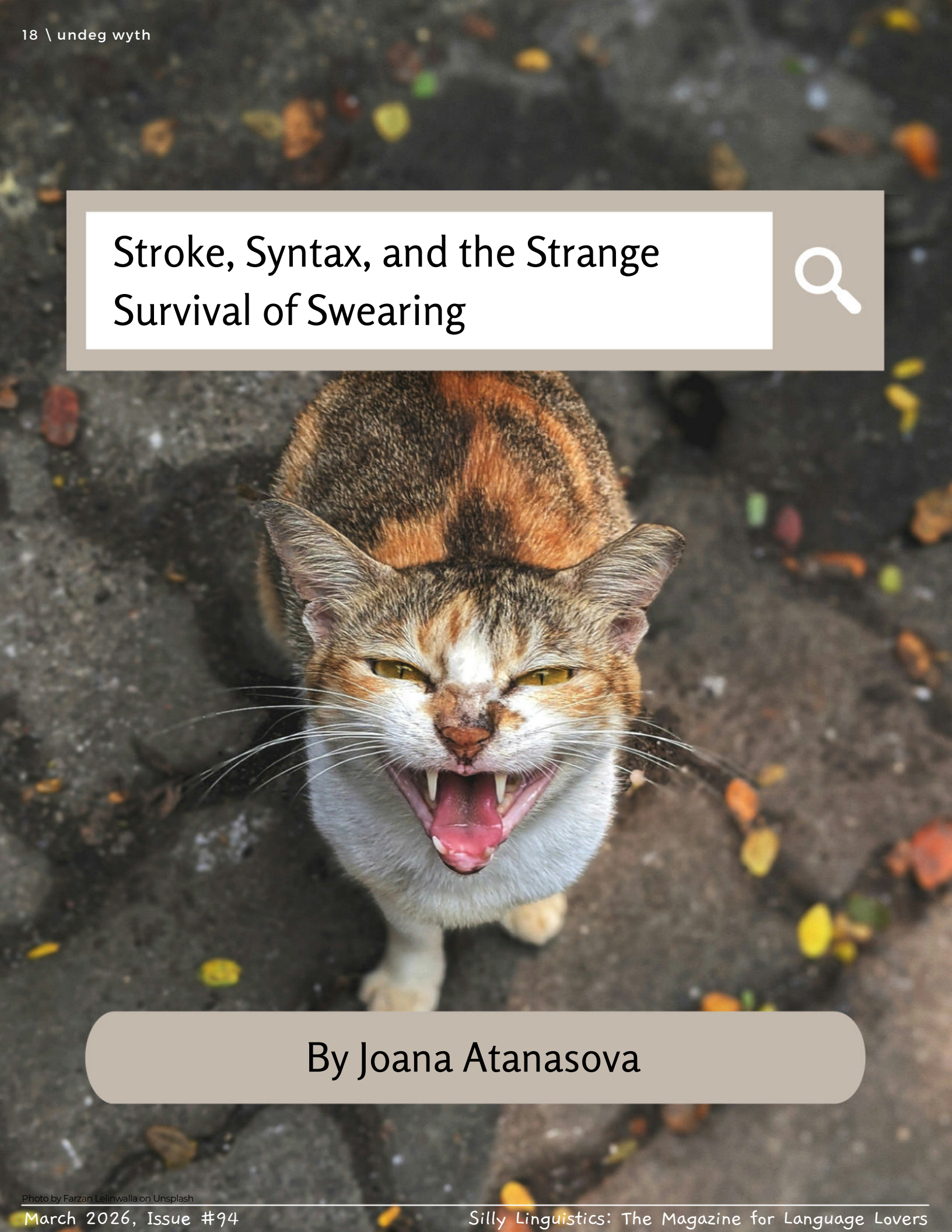
1. They want to improve technology to increase the daily use of Cymraeg, their native language.
2. They want to make sure everyone can access Welsh language technology.
3. They want to improve artificial intelligence (AI) and speech and language technologies (by sharing data and other means)

Some of the outcomes of using AI are that fewer people will be digitally excluded, and hopefully people will feel more supported and confident in developing basic digital skills and using them. AI will aid in learning the language, teaching the language and in increased job skills and opportunities and ensure they have the very best technological advantages available. Thanks to AI, their goal is now more easily achieved.

And what would the advantage be in learning this beautiful language? It can connect you to the Celtic culture by allowing you to better understand their literature, their culture, and their music. The most famous Welsh saying is Cwtch means hug or warm embrace and seems most fitting to end this article.

[1] https://www.gov.wales/welsh-language-technology-and-ai-updates

Stroke, Syntax, and the Strange Survival of Swearing



By Joana Atanasova

Photo by Farzan Lelinwalla on Unsplash

A couple of weeks back I stumbled upon a video on social media of this poor bloke who had had two brain stem strokes in the span of 24 hours. He survived, but of course not without repercussions. His movement was fine, he was breathing OK, the damages were mainly in his speaking abilities. He wasn't able to utter a single word. Until his wife told him to get angry at the situation in hopes that that would put some fuel in the fire or the desire for recovery. And just as I was sure that he was going to fail at the task or get a few syllables out, the man straight up cursed like a trucker. A man who couldn't otherwise speak coherently because of his condition.

Now, don't get me wrong, I always take everything online with a grain of salt, especially since the dawn of AI evolution. However skimming through the comments I saw some alleged neurologists say how that happens often. Does it now? I beg to differ, I thought. No way a man that couldn't speak a word suddenly get such a perfect "fuck you" out.

Then later that day I hit my hand and broke a nail.

Now, if you have ever experienced this particular kind of tragedy, you know that it does not inspire poetry. It does not encourage reflective language. What it encourages is a very specific kind of word. A short one. Usually very loud and usually profane. And it got me thinking about the level of nonsense that video was on actually. Of course, I had to google it then.

And it turns out that linguists and neurologists both find this particular topic fascinating.

There is a strange quirk in the way the human brain handles language. Normally, when we speak, we rely heavily on specific areas in the left hemisphere of the brain that deal with grammar, word retrieval, and sentence construction. One of the most famous of these regions is Broca's area, which is responsible for coordinating the motor patterns needed for speech.

When this region is damaged, however, often after a stroke, people can develop a condition called aphasia. Someone with aphasia may struggle to form sentences, retrieve words, or speak fluently. They know what they want to say, but the linguistic machinery refuses to cooperate. Speech becomes slow, fragmented, and frustrating.

But here is the strange part.

In many cases, even when ordinary speech collapses, swearing survives.

Patients who can barely construct a sentence may still produce perfectly fluent expletives. They might struggle for several seconds to say the word "water," yet if they drop something heavy on their foot the appropriate profanity appears instantly, as if the brain has kept a secret emergency vocabulary locked in a very accessible drawer.

From a linguistic perspective this is both hilarious and incredibly interesting.

The explanation seems to lie in the fact that swearing is not handled entirely by the same systems that produce normal speech. Emotional expressions often involve deeper brain structures such as the amygdala and the basal ganglia. These areas are evolutionarily older than the tidy cortical regions responsible for grammar and syntax. They deal with emotion, instinct, and quick reactions – the sort of neural shortcuts that help humans react to danger without having to politely analyze the situation first.

So, when you hit your thumb with a hammer, your brain does not assemble a thoughtful sentence like "I appear to be experiencing acute localized pain." Instead, the emotional circuitry presses a large red button labeled something like "LINGUISTIC PANIC MODE."

What comes out is usually a swear word.

But before we dismiss swearing as nothing more than emotional noise, linguistics steps in with an important correction. Profanity may feel spontaneous and chaotic, but it actually follows a surprising number of linguistic rules.

Take one of the most famous examples in English: the ability to insert a swear word directly inside another word. English speakers are perfectly comfortable saying things like "abso-fucking-lutely." It rolls off the tongue so naturally that nobody stops to think about it.

However, if someone says "ab-fucking-solutely," it suddenly sounds wrong. Native speakers sense immediately that the word has been attacked in the wrong place.

Why? Because English places the inserted expletive right before the stressed syllable of the word. Even in moments of emotional outburst, our internal grammar is quietly enforcing prosodic rules. In other words, we may be angry, but apparently, we are still grammatically responsible.

Swearing also fits neatly into a linguistic category known as formulaic language. Unlike ordinary sentences, which are assembled piece by piece according to grammatical rules, formulaic expressions are stored in the brain as ready-made chunks. Think about phrases like "How's it going," "Oh my God," or "You've got to be kidding me." These expressions are not freshly constructed each time we say them; they are retrieved as single units.

Profanity behaves in much the same way. Most swear phrases are rhythmically fixed and emotionally loaded, which makes them ideal candidates for rapid retrieval. This may help explain why they survive neurological damage that disrupts normal sentence construction. If swear

phrases are stored as chunks rather than assembled from scratch, they are more resilient when the grammar machinery starts misbehaving.

Another reason linguists find swearing interesting is that it often has very little to do with literal meaning. If someone says, “That’s fucking brilliant,” the swear word does not add factual information. The brilliance of the object remains exactly the same with or without the profanity.

What the swear word does add is force.

It intensifies the emotion of the sentence. It signals enthusiasm, frustration, surprise, or irritation. In many cases the profanity functions almost like an emotional amplifier attached to the sentence.

From a pragmatic perspective, swearing is therefore less about describing reality and more about performing emotion. It tells listeners something about the speaker’s internal state rather than about the external world.

And then, of course, there is the social dimension, which is where things become even more linguistically entertaining.

The impulse to swear may come from ancient emotional circuitry, but the specific words we swear with are entirely cultural. Different languages build their profanity around different taboos. Some cultures rely heavily on religious blasphemy, others on sexuality, bodily functions, family relations, or social status.

This means that swear words are not inherently offensive sounds floating around the universe. They are socially constructed linguistic landmines. Communities collectively decide which words carry explosive power, and speakers learn very quickly which ones should be used carefully.

Children often discover these words with great excitement. Teenagers experiment with them enthusiastically, usually at maximum volume. Adults, meanwhile, become skilled at controlling them depending on the situation. The same person who swears freely among friends can suddenly produce pristine, perfectly polite language in a job interview.

This ability to switch between linguistic styles is known as register, and profanity is one of its most noticeable markers. In some environments – professional kitchens, construction sites, military units – swearing is practically a dialect of its own. In others, it is treated as a dangerous substance that should never be released into polite conversation. What is fascinating is that everyone seems to understand these rules instinctively. Even the people who claim not to care about language care very much about where and when certain words are used.

All of this suggests that swearing is not a failure of language, nor is it evidence of a limited vocabulary, despite what every disapproving schoolteacher in history has insisted. Instead, it appears to be a specialized linguistic tool – one designed for speed, emotional intensity, and social signaling.

It operates at the intersection of neurology, culture, and grammar. It follows linguistic rules even when it feels spontaneous. It reflects cultural taboos while tapping into ancient emotional circuits. And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that language is not just a calm, rational system for exchanging information. It is also a way for humans to react instantly to the world around them. Sometimes that reaction is eloquent. Sometimes it is poetic. And sometimes it is four letters shouted very loudly after an unfortunate encounter with a piece of furniture. From a linguistic perspective, all three are equally fascinating.

JAPANESE GENDER & PRONOUNS II

YOUTH AND GENDER EXPLORATION

By Caboshone

Oftentimes in English and other Western languages (think French, German etc.) an individual's identity is directly tied to gender through language in a way that is unchanging even when accommodating for identities outside of the gender binary. In English and French, it's uncommon to switch pronouns once you've been assigned one or decided on one initially: if you're "*she*" or "*elle*" now, then you should stay that way forever: it's an indication of your identity at its core, beyond just an indication of your character.

Even as languages develop socially and open up avenues for usage of more pronouns than are traditional (the singular 'they' in English; '*iel*' and '*ille*' in French and even personal neo-pronouns) the idea that these pronouns should stay static is a common one, and the option of changing them after that often begets a sentiment that the initial usage was wrong, rather than outdated as a personal representation.

But this idea of core identity being represented in pronoun choice permanently isn't prolific everywhere. As discussed in the first article in this series, '*Japanese Gender & Pronouns: The Modern Social Environment*', the Japanese language has both more varied gender associations with personal pronouns and more fluid usage of various ones per person.

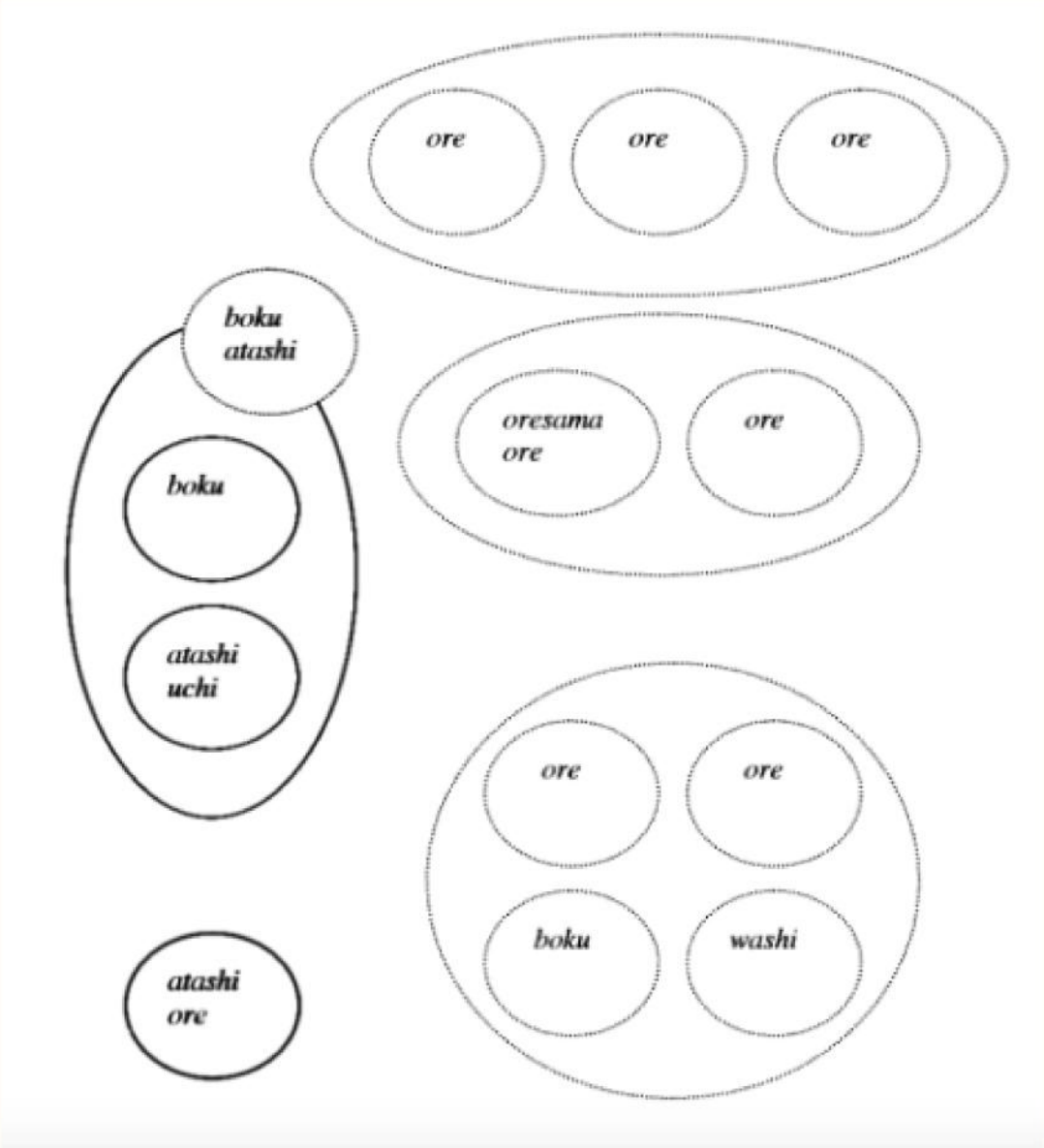
But even that is from a traditionally formal perspective, in more recent times (and also of course, across history) the rigidity of the usage of personal pronouns to express gender is even more fluid than previously explained. Beyond just multiple pronouns per binary gender, the usage of pronouns that contrast your identified gender has been shown to start very young as a means of self-exploration and identity-building without the assumption that this decision means something specific about you forever as it would in the West should a child choose to use a pronoun contrary to what is expected.

Especially among junior high-schoolers in Japan, personal pronouns are a mode of personal expression rather than a statement of core identity. There are girls who use the youthful, masculine 僕 [boku] as well as the rougher 俺 (ore) to refer to themselves in situations where they want to seem more confident, more masculine or any number of other associations these pronouns have. Some girls enjoy using these pronouns especially around other female friends to project an air of care and protection while others may use them only in the presence of boys, to better fit the social dynamic present.

It isn't just girls who find themselves exploring the significance of gendered first person pronouns in their every day life though, boys too have passionate opinions about them and their usage.

It is often expected that a boy will follow a certain default pronoun usage progression throughout his life: <first name> (as a toddler) → 僕 (from young child to young teen) → 俺 (during their older the older teens briefly) → 私 [watashi]・僕 (again as a young adult) → 俺 (again as a middle-aged man). This progression itself is not uncommon, and is often encouraged by peer-lead and societal pressures on how one should behave — whether to seem more manly as a teen going into adulthood, or to be humble and diligent when entering the workforce — but, like any pressure, there are those that feel staying true to themselves outweighs any social backlash.

Due to its association with vulgarity and roughness, there are many boys (and men) who don't identify with using 俺 at all, even in spite of its ubiquity amongst their peers and — especially during high-school — dabble in using more traditionally feminine pronouns (eg. あたし [atashi] and 私 [watashi]) for their day-to-day. Similarly, there are those that prefer the less-common masculine pronouns (eg. 俺様 [oresama] and わし [washi]) which hold their own unique connotations and motivations begetting their usage.



Modified diagram from Miyazaki, A. (2004) '*Japanese junior high school girls' and boys'first-person pronoun use and their social world*', *Japanese Language, Gender, and Ideology*, (3), *pp.* 261. *Dotted lines depict male-identifying students and social groups; bold lines depict female-identifying students and social groups.*

As demonstrated in the diagram above, the breadth of pronoun usage amongst high-school students (and to a lesser degree, adult society) is far wider than what could be predicted based only on a basic understanding of the gendered pronouns present in modern-day Japanese. Even still, the declared gender identities of these students is not presumed to be changed by the usage of pronouns associated with genders other than their own: not permanently defining their selves in any way as this kind of pronoun usage may be interpreted coming from speakers of a Western language in a Western high school context.

A deeper look into how these choices may present in the adult population is planned for release in the next issue of Silly Linguistics once again. So stay tuned, and get ready to learn about how gendered pronouns affect the workplace and women's roles in it!

A ROSE APPLE BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULDN'T SELL

THE LINGUISTICS OF Fruit



BY LAURA RIKONO

You are an intrepid traveller exploring Southeast Asia. You have come across a local market, and look forward to a quick wander to savour the exotic sights and sounds. Then you come across an interesting stall. It's just a table covered in a garish plastic cloth, and it has an odd assortment of objects for sale. There's a pile of fuzzy brown threads, which you think might be tobacco. Those dark pebbly things are probably seeds, perhaps for traditional medicine. And the bundles of leaves? Spinach, or tea, or both. But what about those round, dull, dusty, beige things the size of large grapes? Are they some kind of fruit? You suspect they might be, but some of them are leaking a suspicious white fluid from where the stem broke off, so you remain wary.

"What are those?" you ask the market stall person in your best attempt at the local language.

The market stall person answers, "Langsat."

"Oh." You smile and nod, but then you regretfully pass on by because, as adventurous as you are, those fruit-like objects look a bit too much like alien eggs. And anyway, the next stall has some fried doughy things that look far more tempting.

Oh dear, poor langsat seller. But what if they'd called this fruit velvet grapes instead? You might have reconsidered, for they did look a bit like grapes, with a sort of velvety skin, but with just the name langsat, they were just too weird. People can be reluctant to try things they've never seen before. They are, however, more likely to try if the thing has been anchored to the familiar in some way. Thus, throughout history, fruit-sellers and importers have worked to make unfamiliar names more inviting. There are broadly three ways to do this: borrow from the familiar, co-opt a generic fruit word, or lean into the exoticness.

Let's start with an example of borrowing: the Chinese gooseberry, aka *Actinidia chinensis*, aka kiwi fruit. It originated in China, where it was known as *míhóutáo*. The early English names likened it to gooseberries, calling it Wilson's gooseberry, Ichang gooseberry, or gooseberry vine. It's not an unreasonable comparison as both fruits are smallish, capsule-shaped, sour, and furred. But in the 1950s, the association with gooseberry became a liability as normal gooseberries were being plagued by a fungal disease. So New Zealand exporters

rebranded it as kiwifruit, and that's how we know it today. The dragon fruit (*Selenicereus undatus*), originally *pitaya*, was subject to a similar reinvention. Though it presumably doesn't taste of dragons, the name is appropriate thanks to the fruit's hot pink scales and yellow-edged beard.

But borrowing only works when there's a genuine resemblance to exploit. When the fruit is too unfamiliar, naming conventions may reach for something more generic. For instance, anything fist-sized and vaguely roundish is likely to have the name apple slapped on it: pineapple, rose apple, and custard apple. This is particularly unfair in the case of the rose apple (*Syzygium samarangense*; also called water apple and wax apple). It looks like a shiny deformed apple, but if you bite into one, you'll be sorely disappointed.

A good rose apple is a superior fruit in its own right — crisp, watery, mildly sweet, and rose-scented. Not necessarily better than an apple, but we're comparing apples and… rose apples here. Mango is another catch-all. Consider the mangosteen (*Garcinia mangostana*), which has little to do with mango. But in Malay it is called *manggustan*, which comes from *manggis hutan* or forest mango. In other words, if a fruit is roundish, edible and plucked from a tree, it likely has apple or mango in its name, regardless of botanical reality.

And yet there's a limit to how far anchoring to the familiar can stretch because some fruits are simply too alien. In such cases, the exotic name might even become an asset in itself, signalling that this is a different experience entirely, not a variation of something you already know. The durian (*Durio zibethinus*) and rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceum*) may have kept their Malay names (from *duri*, thorn, and *rambut*, hair) because the alternatives – armoured melon and hairy lychee – hardly scream EAT ME! Then again, there's durian's reputation to consider. By the time you encounter your first one, you have already heard about it, and if a fruit comes with a story, it's anchored.

So, back to our langsat seller, with their unknown, unstoried fruit. Had they labelled their wares blonde plums or pearl mangos, they might have shifted their entire stock. As it was, the intrepid traveller went without. It's a shame, because I think they'd have loved the nicely tart and juicy flavour of the langsat. But names are the first thing we offer strangers, and with fruit the first impression counts.

Thanks for reading Silly Linguistics issue #94

We hope you enjoyed it!

Send any questions or comments you might have to magazine@sillylinguistics.com

Or check us out on Bluesky @stevevagabond.bsky.social and @sillylinguistics.com

Do also get in touch if you fancy writing for us!

Check out Steve the Vagabond on Facebook at:
facebook.com/stevethevagabond, also check out Silly Linguistics online at:
Sillylinguistics.com



Editor: Steve the Vagabond
Graphic Designer: Kristel Ho
Photo by Mehmet Ali Turan