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Witless, Irritating, Recurring Words

Dave Schelhaas

A characteristic of American spoken English from time to time is the emergence of a fad in which one particular word is repeated at the beginning of a sentence or phrase. For a number of years in the 1980s the word was “Hey.” At the beginning of a sentence—especially a sentence that was a response in a conversation—a speaker would say something like, “Hey, I know what you mean” or “Hey, that’s a good idea” or “Hey, you gotta stop thinking that way.”

Almost any opening remark in a conversation could be answered with a “Hey” sentence: “The preacher had a good sermon this morning.”

“Hey, he hit the nail on the head, didn’t he?”

“Our dog threw up this morning.”

“Hey, that happens.”

It became so annoying that a writer for the now defunct *Saturday Review of Literature* wrote a column titled “Hey Fever” that deplored the over-use of “Hey.”

So these days we are afflicted with sentences that begin with “So.” I think these “so” sentences were begun by academics when they were being interviewed, but now almost everyone, but especially academics, begins her first sentence with *so*. *So* is used even if no question or cause precedes it. Someone comes up to you and says, “So, I have to fly to Chicago this afternoon.” Or he’s giving a lecture and the first thing he says is “So I want to talk to you today about social democracies.” For most of its life “so” has been a cause/effect word: “We ran out of milk, so I drove to the Fairway to get a gallon.” Or it has been a synonym for “thus.”

I expect—hope—that in a few years, this excessive, *non sequitur* use of “so” will have run its course, and we will start most of our sentences with other more sensible words. For a while, however, we will continue to use this “so,” and I am sure you will catch me using it from time to time

as well.

But there is another recurring language phenomenon that I fear is here to stay, and that is the repeated, excessive use—in all kinds of situations and many different positions in the sentence—of another word. This word or some form of it can be a noun, a verb, an adjective, or adverb. It can be the first word in the sentence or the last, appear at the beginning of a clause or phrase or at the end or at several points in between.

I must quickly explain that it is primarily in movies that I have heard people use this word with such startling frequency. I do not live in a speech community where it is used with great frequency, but it seems that in certain English-speaking groups—groups that might be economically deprived, for example, or groups that are very wealthy or possessing great political power—it is frequently used. In the movies, however, nearly every speech community uses this word with depressing frequency.

I assume that the directors of these movies, who seem to be committed to realism in every other aspect of their production, believe they are accurately portraying the speech habits of real people when the characters in their movies talk this way. But I can’t quite believe it, can’t imagine it.

Narrowly defined, this word simply describes a behavior that involves a physical release which brings great pleasure. By now I suppose it is clear to you, dear reader, that the word I am speaking of is the word “belch.”

Let me illustrate my point by referring to a movie I saw recently. It is a scene between two men. The older one is terribly angry with the younger one, his brother. So he tears into him. He gives him a bawling out like he’s never heard before.

“You belching belch,” he says.

“Belch you,” the younger one says.

“You dumb belch,” says older guy.

“Ah, belch yourself.”

“Belch, belch, belch. How belching many belching stunts are you belching going to belching pull?”

“Oh, belch me.”

And so it went. I found myself wanting to shout at them the words Henry Higgins says to Eliza Doolittle early in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*: “Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don’t stand there cooing like a bilious pigeon.”

Or belching.

Some might argue that the outrageous social gaffe that a public belch represents among people of good taste has given the word an extraordinary intrinsic power that justifies its excessive use. I would argue that its frequent use has already voided it of most of its power. I am not arguing for good taste but for good writing.

Shaw invokes the name of Shakespeare, so let me state as plainly as I can that none of his characters ever engaged in dialogue as stunted and “monotone” as the one above. He did, to be sure, use vulgar language that might have offended people of “good taste,” but never so profusely, and most often couching his vulgar words in clever puns.

In Leo Rostand’s great play, *Cyrano De Bergerac*, a character tries to insult Cyrano by telling him that his nose is “err. . .very large.” Cyrano replies, “Is that all?” And then he goes on for over 400 words telling the character what he might have said had he “the smallest leaven of letters or wit.” (One example: “Do you so dote on birds, you have been at pains to fit the little darlings with a roost?”) Cyrano was not offended by the attack on

his appearance, but by the fact that it displayed no intelligence, no imagination, no wit.

That’s exactly the problem with the speech of so many characters in contemporary movies. I suppose one might argue of the movie I was watching that the excessive use of the B-word powerfully illustrates the desperateness of the characters’ situation at a particular moment, except that the entire movie is splattered with B-words. Ironically, one of the characters in the dialogue above—while he’s no Cyrano—is a sort of poet. One might hope that he has more tools in his toolbox than this one word.

In William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*, Annie Sullivan says to the still wordless Helen Keller: “I wanted to teach you—oh everything the earth is full of, Helen, everything on it that’s ours for a wink and it’s gone, and what we are on it, the—light we bring to it and leave behind in—words, why, you can see five thousand years back in a light of words...”

Yes, words. Miss Sullivan did not stop with teaching that first word, *water*, but went on to teach Helen a dictionary full of words and thereby opened her world far wider than anyone who knew her could have imagined.

The English language probably has more words than any other language on earth and has absorbed words from most of the world’s languages. It “is the sea which receives tributaries from every region under heaven,” says Ralph Waldo Emerson. Yet contemporary film seems to be telling us that we are a nation of English-speaking people whose working vocabulary has dwindled to a miniscule puddle.

This causes me to worry that the omnipresent “belch” is not a temporary glitch in our speaking habits like “so” or “hey” but is here for the foreseeable future.