

A nose by any other name would still smell

The evolution of living languages, particularly the American version of the English language, never ceases to amaze me. The twists and turns that languages take are primarily influenced by circumstance, confluence of cultures, and invention.

Often, for reasons that I don't understand, we compress language into abbreviations, as well as into incomplete sentences and phrases to fulfill some unspoken need to communicate faster. In everyday speech, the language no longer appears to be savored, or artfully constructed to inspire thought or further response. Instead, it is used to convey information as quickly as possible as if communication were a distasteful task that should be completed in a hurry.

A simple example can be found in the way people are named. In some cultures, the use of a single name for identification purposes is a normal and accepted practice. Many of the members of tribal societies in the Middle East use one name, usually a given name, as do people in Asia. Asians, however, generally use a family name as their choice of identity. In Biblical times, to avoid confusion, a man might be known as David of Jerusalem, naming the town where he was born to further identify him or differentiate him from say, David of Gadot.

Although the use of one name works in remote areas where populations are small and tribe members or villagers all know one another, it is not practical for areas with large populations. Let's say only one name were used on a world



You can't beat a system you can't understand

By Sam Bari

scale. In the 1800s if you asked a man named Strauss to sell you his wares, you would get a pair of jeans or a waltz, depending on which one you asked. Can you imagine, in the 1970s, asking President Ford if he would sell you a car? No, using one name in modern times would never do. Consequently, most of the civilized world uses three and sometimes more names to identify each person as well as official supporting documentation.

One would think we would learn something from the confusion experienced by using one name and be diligent in our efforts to make language simple and pragmatic. Unfortunately, at least in America, that is not the case.

Over the years, Madison Avenue and the advertising industry reduced the language to a series of abbreviations that left indelible marks on both speech and writing patterns. It began with "advertisements" shrinking to "ads" and the onslaught escalated from there. Advertising campaigns reduced "doughnut" to "donut." "Coke" became a household word for all cola drinks, "Kleenex" became a synonym for "disposable tissue," and "televisions" became "TVs," just to name a few.

Now, we live in the age of the acronym. Unfortunately, acronyms are often used incorrectly. Many are nothing more than the initialization of the first letter of each

word in the name of a product that when assembled, does not spell a real word. A true acronym is a word formed from the initial letters of other words.

"NOW" is an acronym that stands for National Organization for Women. "Now" always was a real word. Using the first letter of each word in the National Organization for Women, the true acronym, "NOW" was formed.

"Radar" is an acronym that stands for Radio Detection And Ranging. "Laser" is an acronym meaning Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Both "radar" and "laser" were coined to fulfill a technological need and are now accepted as common nouns in the modern English dictionary.

"NAACP" is an initialization of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It is not an acronym.

"NASA" which stands for North American Space Administration is another initialization. It, too, is not an acronym.

The problem with acronyms and initializations is that anyone can use them. For instance, "NASA" is also used by the North American Saxophone Alliance. Call the wrong NASA when you want to report little green men landing in your back yard and you could be talking to an unsympathetic musician.

The perfectly legitimate "NOW" acronym is also a common term used in computer technology that means, "network of workstations."

This brings us to the world of the Internet and a completely new set of rules concerning the use of abbreviations, initializations, and acronyms. An Internet dictionary was created as a reference for

Internet users to communicate in Internet shorthand so they didn't have to spell out time consuming real words. Abbreviations are used for everything. Like other acronyms and initializations, Internet shorthand often has multiple meanings, depending on who is using the term.

A common term is "BRB." Internet users in chat rooms and instant message programs use it whenever they leave the computer for a few moments. It means "Be Right Back." Unfortunately, in the

real world of industry it stands for "Big Red Button." Around certain equipment, when someone yells "BRB," they mean to press the big red button to turn off a piece of equipment that could possibly be dangerous.

"Big Red Button" is also a term referring to a button on our President's desk. We all know why that button is there. Let's just say, the President was communicating on the Internet and someone typed in "BRB" . . . I'd like to think that nothing would happen. However, if it did, I suppose we wouldn't have to worry about living in a system we can't understand.

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"The Dead Fathers Club" by Matt Haig – a funny quirky tale with dead, murdered fathers appearing to adolescent sons – shades of Hamlet.

"Ten Days in the Hills" by Jane Smiley – newest work of Pulitzer Prize winning Smiley, a Hollywood tale with Boccaccio as a model.

"Greatness: the Rise of Tom Brady" by the writers of the Boston Globe. His off-the-field escapades may have tarnished some of his luster, but he's still the youngest quarterback ever to win a superbowl.

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