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Incensed at 'incent'? Don't decool as I present

*By Diether Haenicke
September 02, 2009*

A living language is something marvelous because, like a living organism, it may grow, change, or mutate and thus remain fresh and surprising. It appears that young speakers especially enjoy experimenting with language, often adding new words to it or changing the meaning of words and concepts.

The word "cool," for instance, was once quite plain in its meaning. It then took a meaning signifying relaxed attitude and behavior. But now it is widely used as an adjective suitable to describe practically anything: a person, a movie, a concert, an idea - you name it. In fact it is so widely used that I often think the speaker knows only this one adjective and no other. While it was an enriching innovation initially, the word's current indiscriminating use begins to empty it of any but the most general meaning. I predict it will eventually disappear from being in vogue like so many other words that I remember from the '40s and '50s which now cause blank eyes in teen-agers.

As a teacher I am always challenged when the spoken language demands entry into the more formal, written word. How to grade a paper that uses words and grammar heard every day on campus but still off the books, so to say.

Many (otherwise well-educated) people do accept in their speech the demise of the dative, as in: "Who is this for?" "She invited Mary and I," or "To who did you give the letter?" I still mark this as wrong, often to the utter dismay of an unappreciative student. In such moments I wish I were a native speaker of English, since many a good child from Michigan and Ohio has silently doubted my authority in matters of correct English.

Lately I have been wondering about the innovative use of verbs. I was always uncomfortable when a stewardess told me to "deplane" the aircraft. I know that one can debone a chicken, but deplane an aircraft? Can I decar my automobile? Or dehouse my condominium? I don't like "deplane" as a word, but I guess it is in our language to stay.

In the business world I have picked up a few other gems. A board on which I served was severing a business relationship, and we informed our partners that we were "departicipating." Is this more elegant or more polite than quitting, leaving or ending our contract?

Similarly innovative is "to incent," meaning to provide incentives for employees.

"Mary needs to be better incented," I recently read in some board materials. Should I feel incensed?

At another board meeting we were asked to take out our calendars because the administration wanted "to calendar a project." Clearly another good one!

At yet another occasion we were not given a gift but accepted a "gifted house." Whatever happened to the verb "to donate"? No longer good enough? Up to that point I had only heard of "gifted children," which of course did not mean they were left on our doorsteps.

However, the university is just as innovative as the business world. It employs people who are "siting a building" i.e. finding the right place for it. Or when a faculty member provides liaison to another governing body, I now hear frequently that "Bob will liaise" to the executive committee. Poor Bob!

But the most questionable item to me is when a transitive verb is changed into an intransitive one without any good reason whatsoever. It may be pure laziness. The case in point is "to present" which is transitive and takes a direct object as in: "He presented a paper." But the widely accepted use on campuses these days is: "I was at a conference and presented." Or: "Last year Bob presented several times." Presented what? I ask. His face? His opinion? A paper, perhaps?

What is it with us nitpickers that we feel rubbed the wrong way by such innocent little linguistic glitches? I guess we just enjoy noticing how language changes and like to comment on it. On the other hand: If someone properly incented me I would perhaps demure my high horse and decomment on linguistic topics.

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