

Q. Please write a column about the difference between *loan* and *lend*, which no one gets right.

A. This request, sent by Portland, Oregon, attorney Jonathan Hoffman, has been asked before, but it bears answering again. The last four words of his e-mail provide the answer: "... no one gets right." When even literate writers, along with virtually the entire public, fail to "get it right" by distinguishing the meanings of two words, the difference in meaning disappears—despite the efforts of a small minority who know there is a difference.

Attorney Hoffman quoted a James Kilpatrick column lamenting the failure to distinguish the two verbs. He argued that in "Julius Caesar," Shakespeare did *not* say, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, Loan me your ears." But that was long ago. Today, *loan* is the choice of a large majority of English speakers, as both a noun ("The bank made subprime loans.") and as a verb ("My brother loaned me some money.").

I admit that I don't like that change any more than Mr. Hoffman, so I'll continue to use *lend* as the proper verb in the second sentence. But I have little hope that *lend* will survive. Does it matter? Perhaps not, for the loss of *lend* does not seem to cause a loss of clarity, so it is probably not worth fighting for.

The loss of *lend* is part of a process of "leveling" that our language is undergoing. As a result, valuable distinctions disappear. One such loss is the distinction between *unique* and *unusual*. The adjective *unique* once meant "one of a kind," but as people began to insert adverbs like *some-what*, *very*, and *completely*, in front of *unique*, that adjective diminished in strength and has come to mean "unusual." So today, to express the original meaning of unique, one is forced to say "completely unique." That seems to me a pity.

Mr. Hoffman also referred to the January "Language for Lawyers" column, which discussed ungrammatical double negatives. A reader had asked whether the ungrammatical double

negative *irregardless* was now considered correct. (The answer is no.)

Later in the same column I wrote "... double negatives are not uncommon in English." I was then referring to another kind of double negative, the grammatically correct kind; like the phrase "not uncommon." When you say something is "not uncommon," you are sitting on the fence, for you are not saying that it is common, nor that it is not common. You are deliberately creating a rhetorical evasion, leaving vague your exact feelings about the subject.

From the Mailbag I

Craig H. Winslow, a former editor in chief of *The Federal Lawyer* sent a comment that may interest many lawyers. An advocate at the Supreme Court coined the term *romanette* in order to identify lowercase Roman numerals; for instance, the use of *i* to indicate lowercase Roman numeral one and *ii* to indicate lowercase Roman numeral two. Mr. Winslow asked whether I had seen the new term (I had not); neither, apparently, had the Chief Justice of the United States, causing "a bit of a stir" at the Court.

The question that the new term raises is whether the choice of a French diminutive suffix is appropriate to affix to a Latin word—especially when a Latin diminutive suffix was available—the resulting term being *romanula*.

From the Mailbag II

Chicago attorney David L. Hanson sent me an e-mail that said, in part, "I recall that in a column many years ago you wrote that the title *Chairman* was not, as is often claimed, 'sexist.' My wife is a strong defender of the traditional title *Chairman* to identify both sexes. She considers the appellation *chair* to be offensive because a chair is an inanimate object intended to be sat on. She also finds the coined word *chairperson* clumsy, ostentatious, and politically correct. I promised her that you would be the best person to provide the his-

torical and intellectual ammunition she needs to defend her position."

What a timely e-mail! When Mr. Hanson opens the current issue of *The Federal Lawyer* and turns to "Language for Lawyers," he can tell his wife I support her views. Changing the vocabulary does not change reality. The reverse is true, a change in the view of reality does result in a changed vocabulary. The youth of America, because they believe that women and men are equal, are slowly changing our vocabulary.

A further improvement of the attitude toward women may be ahead; news headlines report that U.S. women are poised to surpass men on the nation's payrolls. Although the proportion of women who are working has changed little since the recession began, 82 percent of the lost jobs have occurred to men, who are mostly employed in distressed industries like manufacturing and construction.

Heather Boushey, a senior economist at the Center for American Progress, says that because women are employed in areas like health care and education, the proportion of women working may continue to increase. The recession has given women the burden—or the opportunity—to be breadwinners. Those changes in status will eventually eliminate the supposed need for politically correct language. **TFL**

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