

Q. I often wonder about statements like, “A person that” It seems to me that the correct form would be, “A person who” Am I right or wrong, or is this a matter of preference?

A. St. Louis, Mo., reader James Galen is right: “A person who” is correct. For the best usage, choose “who” for persons (and pets), and “that” for objects. This distinction mirrors the (now seldom observed) distinction between *who*, *whom*, and *which*: “John Smith, *who* is a member of our firm is the person *whom* I met today; we discussed my computer, *which* crashed this morning.”

Until the middle of the 20th century, it was incorrect to use the possessive relative pronoun *who* to refer to an object. You could say, “The person whose computer crashed,” but not “the table whose leg broke.” You had to use a circumlocution like, “The table, the leg of which broke.” That rule no longer exists, the unwieldy substitute probably being the reason.

Attorney Gallen also mentioned that the location *talking to* instead of *talking with* bothers him. Both prepositions are grammatically correct, but the give-and-take of normal conversation is better expressed by *with* rather than *to*.

Q. A new verb that has sprung into the news is *claw back*. Why is it that journalists and political commentators latch on to all the new words they hear, abandoning the perfectly good old words that have served us all for a long time?

A. Before I looked at the signature I knew that this question had been sent by a man, because women would not have had to ask it. An analogue is, “Why do women buy new clothes, furniture, gadgets, etc., although they have old ones that would work just as well?”

The word *claw back*, however, has another advantage; it more adequately reflects the situation it describes than older verbs like *retrieve* and *regain*. Our current recession has spawned numerous new terms like *claw back*, many of them expressing strong feeling about the state of the economy. *Claw back* has gained instant popular-

ity, probably because of the angry implication of the word *claw*, a seemingly innocuous noun that first appeared in Old English and has been present ever since. A claw is “a sharp, often curved nail on the toe of a mammal, reptile, or bird”; the verb “to claw” implies a vigorous, determined, digging motion, aptly describing taxpayers’ anger about the behavior of some bankers.

Therefore, *claw back* has become the popular word used to describe the effort to retrieve the huge bonuses some bankers paid themselves after taxpayers’ money had rescued their firms from bankruptcy. Connecticut Sen. Christopher Dodd called the bankers’ behavior “shameful, outrageous, and the height of irresponsibility,” adding that “every means should be pursued to claw back that money.” Claw back has become a “fad” term, but it is used specifically in that context, so it may disappear if and when the public ire disappears.

Another word that vaunted into popularity due to market conditions is *secularization*. Lew Rainieri, a college dropout who became a Salomon Brothers trader, coined the word *secularization* to name the packaging of loans that could then be sold to institutional investors. It was a popular idea, for it allowed banks to shed risk and make more loans. But it ended in disaster as home ownership exploded. Now that word, along with the practice, is in disrepute.

The term *toxic assets*, the possession of which by banks has been blamed for causing the recession, is aptly named, because it creates both a visceral and cerebral effect. Toxic food causes sickness, and toxic environment can cause death. A new book, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *Dictionary of Business Terms*, includes terms like *toxic assets*, *credit-default swap*, and *Ponzi scheme*, but the author says the dictionary was already out of date by the time it was printed.

Another new word, *tanking*, is more forceful than another relatively new term, *going south*, though both indi-

cate a worsening financial condition. Dictionaries define a *tank* as “a large container for holding or storing fluid or gases,” but the slang meaning of *tanking* is “drinking alcohol to excess.” In a recent press release, the Austin, Texas, semi-conductor industry, which “began tanking in 2000,” is said to have quickly recovered by preparing clean rooms for “emerging green technologies.” This expands and ameliorates the meaning of the adjective *green*, which now also describes current environmental concerns.

So euphemisms can improve and even change meaning. The journal *Chemical and Engineering News* printed a letter from a reader who objected to the word *chemical* because it had been tainted by association in the phrase *harmful chemicals*. He also urged that *drugstores* be called *pharmacies* because of the bad reputation caused by association with the word *drug* and that *druggists* should be called *pharmacists*.

Words, like people, get their reputation from the company they keep. Thus, because the word *sex* has a bad image because it appears in newspaper headlines in the context of “sex crimes” and similar phrases, we now talk about people’s *gender*, although grammar has *gender*, but people have *sex*.

A student at the University of Florida wants to eliminate the word *dormitory*. Call them *residence halls*, he says, because a *dormitory* sounds like a prison. The phrase *carbon-neutral*, which almost nobody had heard of until people began to worry about the environment, was named by *The Oxford English Dictionary* the “Word of the Year” in 2006. And organizations hoping to get stimulus money for scientific research are describing themselves as “petri-dish-ready,” an analogue of “shovel-ready.” We use language not only to define but to reflect and even change the world we inhabit. **TFL**

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