

## Don't vacation without a wordbook.

**D**ear Mr. Word Maven," writes Gary Hart of Troublesome Gulch, Colo. "Given the great power you obviously possess over today's fashion in the American language, can you possibly stop book reviewers, including in your own estimable paper, from using the word *read* (as in 'this book is a *great read*') as a noun? Would we permit someone to describe an excellent meal as a *good eat* or a fine movie as a *good see*? No, of course not! This is wrong. It is course [*sic*]. It is — illiterate."

The former senator has had a good run of approbation since the nation realized how prescient was his unheeded wake-up report on homeland security. But he is unduly alarmist when it comes to functional shift. A *good run*, as used in the previous sentence, is an example of a verb used as a noun. And nouns are used to create verbs all the time: when the noun is made into a verb to carry action, we say it has been *verbified*.

So why not a *good eat*? Here's why not: the colloquialism has long been in use as *good eats*, and no native speaker would use it in a singular form. (However, a restaurant on Madison Avenue in New York calls itself E.A.T.) *Lunch* has been a verb since 1823, and soon became a noun, and now we have "let's *lunch* on the terrace," as well as a direct object ("Let's *do lunch*"); the word has become a linguistic smorgasbord.

What, then, are some *good reads* for word mavens afflicted with spare time on vacation? (To be consistently idiolectical, I refer to some audiobooks as *good listens*.) Here is a little list.

"Bad Words for Good: How Foundations Garble Their Message and Lose Their Audience," by Tony Proscio. This free 63-page booklet straightens out philanthropese, the jargon of today's big givers. Recounted is the story of the philosopher Bertrand Russell's talk originally titled "Words and Things"; when this subject was frowned upon as unsuitably plebeian, Russell retitled it "Linguistic Correlates of Epistemological Constructs," and his elitist audience lapped it up.

To get this gem of a no-cost booklet on your computer, go to [www.emcf.org](http://www.emcf.org) and click on the link "Publications." You can download it in PDF (portable document format) or order it electronically. If you don't have a computer, or want to read it in your hand like a normal human being, write to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Suite 900, 250 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10177.

Disdainful of a freebie and want to blow an unconscionable \$120 on a good language book? Try Volume VI of the "Cambridge History of the English Language: English in North America," edited with great flair by John Algeo, our dean of neologists.

Here you will find a delicious chapter on slang by Jonathan E. Lighter, whose final volumes of a historical dictionary of slang were left up the creek without a paddle by Random House cheapskates (a word first recorded in 1896 by the slanguist George Ade; the origin of *up the creek* may be the 19th-century "up Salt River" in Kentucky).

The most useful part of Cambridge's monumental effort is the

glossary. *Idiolect*, which I slipped in above and you were too lazy to look up, is defined as "the speech characteristics of a particular person as contrasted with those of other persons speaking the same language." And here's the most lucid definition of a *phoneme*: "a class of speech sounds (phones) that, contrasted with other such classes, is capable of making a difference in meaning, such as /t/ contrasted with /d/ in *at* and *ad*." That "such as" illuminates the meaning.

"A Grammar Book for You and I . . . Oops, Me!" by C. Edward Good (Capital Books, \$17.95, paperback). Good deals with the hard case previewed in his title in this way: a noun following the verb *to be* formally calls for the subjective case (like *I, he, she*, as in: "Who's there? It is *I*," not *me*). But Good acknowledges the overriding rule of usage: "You'll go further in life by violating the rule of pronoun case and saying, 'It was *me*.'" Now to his title, using the preposition *for*: a noun that is the object of a preposition requires the objective case (like *me, him, her*), and so the correct formal use is also the common usage: "A Grammar Book for You and Me."

"Meshuggenary: Celebrating the World of Yiddish" (Simon & Schuster, \$20; coming out in September), by Payson Stevens, Charles Levine and Sol Steinmetz. This is a half-dictionary, half-cultural survey of jokes, expressions, recipes and proverbs. (Surprise your friends with the Yiddish for "Being poor is no disgrace, but it's no great honor either.") I note the word *zhlob*, defined as "lacking in social skills . . . a slob," and the possibility of a connection with the Irish *slab*, "mud," has me on *shpilkes* (pins and needles).

"Speak Up With Confidence," by Jack Valenti (Hyperion, \$12.95, paperback), shows how to use language while on your feet. The best tip to speakers: Memorize the last paragraph of your speech. The former L.B.J. speechwriter grades the recent presidents for speaking style: F.D.R., A+; Truman, C-; Eisenhower, B; Kennedy, A; Johnson, C+; Nixon, D (but on radio, I'd rate him an A); Ford and Carter, C-; Reagan, A; Bush 41, C; Clinton, A; Bush 43, B+.

The Wall Street Journal Guide to Business Style and Usage, edited by Paul R. Martin (W.S.J. Books, \$30), has unique entries like *triple witching*, *green-shoe clause* and *dragon bonds*. The Journal's style is to skip the periods in familiar abbreviations like *CIA*; The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage (\$15, paperback) puts in the dots. The Journal uses no apostrophe for Presidents Day; The Times does. I like The Times's style on *Presidents'* and The Journal's on the *CIA*.

An offbeat treat for language mavens and bibliophiles is "In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture" — and how it begat interminable subtitles — by Alister McGrath (Anchor, \$15, paperback). In the 1631 edition of this 1611 work, Exodus 20:14 had a small typo in it: the commandment read, "Thou shalt commit adultery." The printers were fined severely for leaving out the *not*, and the edition became known as "the Wicked Bible." It has long sold at a premium. ■