



Codes, quips and sayings – they're all in the family

by Ursula Schoenberg

The other day I was cuddling my 4-year-old daughter, when she smiled angelically at me and said “May I have a piece of souse?” Imagining a secret listener, this question suddenly brought home to me the wonderful fun and power of language usage in the family. The word “souse” derives from German and means “pickled meat”¹, but in our family it means the lower part of the earlobe, which may be gently nibbled if the question above is answered in the affirmative.

This was one of many expressions and catchphrases my dad handed down to me. Dad grew up on a ranch in the American Southwest and lived through the Crash and the Great Depression. This naturally influenced his outlook on life – he was practical, frugal and very down-to-earth. One of his life’s mottos has already been eloquently described by Garrison Keillor when sketching Midwestern men of Scandinavian origin: “Don’t buy new if the old still works.” The other motto is one that caused me a good deal of time and effort after Dad’s death: “Save things, they might come in handy later.”

The up side is that Dad is still with me through these sayings, and I mean on an almost daily basis. Being a modern-day mom-cum-chauffeur for my child, I’m often reminded of his quips, many of them automotive in nature. One of my favourites can be used any time a car with a loose muffler or straining engine passes: “If my car sounded like that, I’d be worried.” Difficult situations with specific drivers provoke a withering “There’s one born every minute,” in our car.

Then there is the category I would describe as “practical living advice”. I have to be more selective when using these phrases, since many of them are wildly outdated and make people look at me oddly if I use them. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” is pretty benign, but when have you last heard the expressions “Don’t take any wooden nickels!” or “I wouldn’t touch it with a 10-foot pole”²? And even though I heard “You drive everybody around you up the wall,” quite a lot as a kid, there was also the comforting (!) “Night night, sleep tight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite!” to tuck me into bed at night.

All this drives my husband crazy, who complains that I have to have the last word in every situation (he’s wrong, of course). Strangely enough, it hasn’t stopped him from adopting some of my dad’s expressions as his own, notably SNAFU (a military acronym for “situation normal, all f.... up”) and “What a bunch of malarkey!” – an expression whose etymology still remains in the dark². He should have listened to my mom. One of the ‘bon mots’ from her

(German) side of the family is “If you marry a girl from Hornburg (the village my mother’s family comes from), you don’t need to buy a dog.” Forewarned is forearmed.

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See also:

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/souse?p>

² <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-mal1.htm>

Agatha’s secrets should help medical writers

Hopefully all EMWA members have taken on board the research findings of The Agatha Project and are including phrase like “can you keep your eye on this”, “more or less”, “a day or two” and “something like that” in their regulatory documentation. These should trigger increases in the inspectors’ serotonin and endorphin levels and fill them with pleasure and satisfaction when reading your documents. Medical writers’ armoury can certainly be enhanced by the findings of the study undertaken by a team of neuro-linguists at the universities of London, Birmingham and Warwick in the UK (ITV1 documentary, 27 December 2005). The researchers subjected Agatha Christie’s works to computer analysis and showed that the all-time best-selling novelist’s word combinations stimulate higher than usual activity in the brain. Not only this, her secret also lies in the use of a very limited vocabulary so that readers are not distracted and can concentrate on the clues and plot. Writers of regulatory documents have long known this secret, however. And as for Agatha’s use of em-dashes—to create a faster-paced, unreflective narrative—these have also been creeping into regulatory documents recently. So much for thinking that em-dashes should be reserved for dramatic effect and are inappropriate for scientific text. Even the opportunity to scorn their substitution for all other forms of punctuation as lazy writing has been denied one, now that a lecturer in English education at King’s College London has dismissed the importance of correct punctuation as absurd (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4 March 2006).