

# VERBATIM®

THE LANGUAGE QUARTERLY

Vol. XIV No.2      Autumn, 1987

EDITOR: LAURENCE URDANG





## Time and Life

Julienne Eden Busic  
Dublin, California

Language serves not only to communicate ideas but to obscure them as well, transforming them according to the psychological needs of the individual speaker. In most cultures, for example, words and images with loaded meanings are dealt with indirectly, euphemistically, as though their essence could be altered, even denied, by assigning them new labels. The extent to which this linguistic transformation occurs indicates the way the culture assimilates or rejects the loaded concept. The type of transformation is important as well. In our society, for example, one does not simply die, one *passes away*, *goes either on to greener pastures* or *west, meets one's Maker*. One also *croaks* or *kicks the bucket*. Here the idea of death, of eternal nothingness, is defused through the use of substitution, or of humor. Death is deprived of its sting, in both instances, either by prettification or ridicule. Fear and apprehension of the ultimate existential void are replaced by a certain whimsicality, a capacity to confront and accept the inevitability of death. The greater the anxiety felt within a culture or even by an individual about a concept, the more extensive the euphemistic system designed to obscure it, to render it tolerable.

The use of and need for euphemism is nowhere more apparent than within a prison population. In this highly specialized subculture, the psychological need to disguise and transform unpalatable realities becomes critical. In fact, conclusions about the nature of prisoner mentality, perception, and philosophy can be reached by examining the form these transformations take and the area in which they most often occur. In prison, the entire consciousness is consumed with the notion of time: how much time one has, what portion will have to be served, whether the time is concurrent or consecutive, whether "you do the time or the time does you." Time is synonymous here with life. Of what else does life consist? What, indeed, is its very essence? The way, then, in which people relate to time is indicative of the way they relate to life in general, and this relation is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in a study of the language used by prisoners to talk about time. Some very basic psychological elements of the alleged "prisoner mentality" emerge during the course of such a study, lending insight into theories set forth by many social psychologists that such a mentality reflects special ways of looking at the world.

The length of a sentence, if it falls within an area between the two extremes of a very short period and a very long one, is expressed not in terms of years but of money. Generally, any sentence of less than five years does not merit its own particular expression and is referred to, if not derisively, then with a certain

amount of condescension. A one-year sentence is one of the few exceptions. This sentence is called a *bullet*, taken from card-players' terminology for an ace. Anyone with a *bullet* has been dealt a good hand, one that is superior to most others. Short sentences are those which can be done *standing on one's head* 'with small inconvenience.' The longer sentences, though, are described in monetary terms, perhaps because prisoners often equate time with money and all time spent in prison is money lost. A prisoner with a five-year sentence is *pulling a nickel*, ten years is *pulling a dime*, and twenty-five is *pulling a quarter*, all small change. These sentences are still relatively manageable and accessible to humor; however, the expressions for types of life sentences move away from concepts of money. In state prisons, those with three felonies are given twenty-to-life sentences. Those with more than three felonies are given fifty-to-life sentences. Thus, one has either *the little bitch* or *the big bitch* laid on him, derived from *habitual* in the Habitual Criminal Act. The prisoner is in the passive role; he doesn't admit to having done anything actively to get the sentence: it is *laid on him*. Doing life means adjusting the consciousness to the fact that the prisoner ceases for the most part to be an autonomous entity. Things are done to him; he does little himself. A straight life sentence with a possibility for parole is referred to as *all day long*. Life without parole is *one dark day*. Time is no longer divided here into manageable units but becomes a continuum without end and without hope. The lightness and humor used to describe the shorter sentences are gone. There is simply no escaping reality, there is little left to joke about.

Humor, however, is a constant in the prison euphemistic system; it enables the prisoner to cope with his sentence, to defuse the tragic implications of his imprisonment. This whimsicality lends itself especially to the subject of concurrent and consecutive sentences. Concurrent sentences are two or more that are served simultaneously; for example, two five-year sentences are merged into one. With a consecutive sentence, one five-year sentence must be served before the second begins. Because a consecutive sentence is far more devastating and psychologically loaded to the prisoner, more humor is used to speak of these particular sentences to make them tolerable. Thus, two five-year sentences given consecutively become, in prison terminology, *two nickels running wild*, *running cockeyed*, or *running bowlegged*. One understands not only the humor here, but also the deeper currents of feeling which run throughout, the images which conjure up disorganization, chaos, a loss of control, lack of coordination, all states of mind typical of a human being left powerless, disenfranchised, imprisoned, without any control over his own actions or destiny.

Other expressions for consecutive sentences add yet another dimension to the prisoner's perception of the world and his role in it. A consecutive sentence becomes *a shove and a kick*. The prisoner is a passive agent, he does no initiating, he is acted upon, as an



object. First he is shoved, then he is kicked, and no mention is made of who is perpetrating this violence. The analogy to a nameless, faceless, uncaring bureaucracy is inescapable. The prisoner's perception of himself is, again, that of a powerless entity, a victim of the fates and a universal injustice. Two nickels *boxcarred* or *stacked* further reinforce this perception. The first evokes images of involuntary connection, the state of being boxed in, stuck on one track from which there is no escape. The second, a *stacked* sentence, conjures up blocks piled one upon another, each standing in a state of extreme precariousness, and completes the prisoner's psychological view of himself as existing in a type of limbo, in danger of toppling over at any time. In fact, there are no expressions presenting the prisoner in an active role save one, *riding the buffalo*, used to express what a prisoner is doing who has been told by the Parole Board to serve all of a five-year sentence. However, though he may be *riding*, he is not necessarily in control or determining the course the animal takes. The animal remains the more active agent, the prisoner the more passive. Actually, prisoners who are given harsh decisions by the Board are more often *slammed* or *stretched* or told to *flatten it* [their sentence] *out*. They are put into a *time tunnel*. These last images are more representative of the prisoner's view of himself as being a powerless mote in the universe, exploited, maligned, and maltreated.

The use of the passive voice to assign him permanently to a fixed and static role, humor to make his assumption of the role bearable, even though the humor tends to reinforce the negative psychological state

in which a prisoner perceives himself—all these linguistic manifestations provide clues to understanding the fatalistic way in which prisoners in general relate to the world and their corresponding role in it. Language is not merely a means for communicating ideas but for predicting behavior as well. To the prisoner, the most important concept in his circumscribed existence is time and, by extension, life. Any prisoner, when speaking about these, continually casts himself in a passive role and uses images that reinforce his sense of powerlessness and disintegration. In so doing, he perpetuates, consciously or not, a state of mind that precludes any modification of his behavior or of his perception of the world. This study indicated that those who regularly used this type of terminology were recidivists, while the others who avoided it tended to be innocent of prior criminal records and did not commit new crimes after release. While this hypothesis is hardly a new one, it does reinforce the idea propounded by many social psychologists that recidivist prisoners have low self-esteem, lack confidence in their abilities, and view themselves as passive pawns in a game that has been manipulated to their disadvantage. Prison slang and euphemism, developing and existing in a closed environment, change slowly—if ever. Therefore, the views of the world expressed by such language are reinforced and passed on from population to population. The results of this short study indicate that prisoner philosophy has changed little in the last twenty years, a notion unlikely to inspire optimism in those who continue to believe in “rehabilitation.”



## Antipodean English

George W. Turner

### *Divided by a Common Tongue*

Those who grow up as members of a minor speech community have one advantage, a strong incentive toward bilingualism. But speakers of a major language such as English have at least some faint shadow of this through their access to a number of literary sublanguages such as Welsh English, Scots, Indian English, British, American, Australian, and other varieties of English. Some more limited passive understanding of varieties of spoken language is also possible. Australians seldom speak of *thumbtacks*, *sophomores*, or *tuxedos*, but would recognize the words and understand their meanings. They know Americans call *lifts elevators* and *petrol gas*, *lollies candy*, *railways railroads* and *trams trolleys* or *streetcars* (known especially because of the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*). Particularly strange is the pronunciation *zee* for *zed*. Australians may not recognize in *tick*

*tack toe* a simple game of *noughts and crosses* and they might not know exactly what a *drugstore* sells, but they know the New York *subway* is not a pedestrian underpass. They rather admire the use of *through* to indicate inclusive dates. Similarly, British English expressions not current in Australia may be understood, *cinema*, *wellington boots*, or *wing* to refer to the mudguard of a car (what Americans equally strangely call the *fender*).

Not infrequently, however, differences result in misunderstandings. If I am told someone called, I assume that that person visited the house; an American or someone influenced by American usage might be referring to a phone call (we do use *call* in that phrase). When my luggage (all right, *baggage*) was stolen from a car (*automobile*?) in England, my wife, staying in the U.S. and, it appears, already contami-