'A whirlwind tour of the joys of English.' Susie Dent

Prose & Cons

The English Language in Just A Minute



Gyles Brandreth

Sunday Times bestselling author

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The English Language in Just A Minute

Gyles Brandreth

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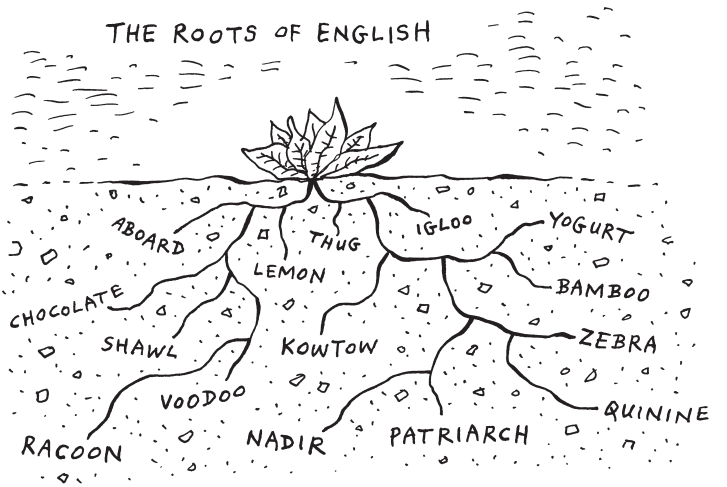
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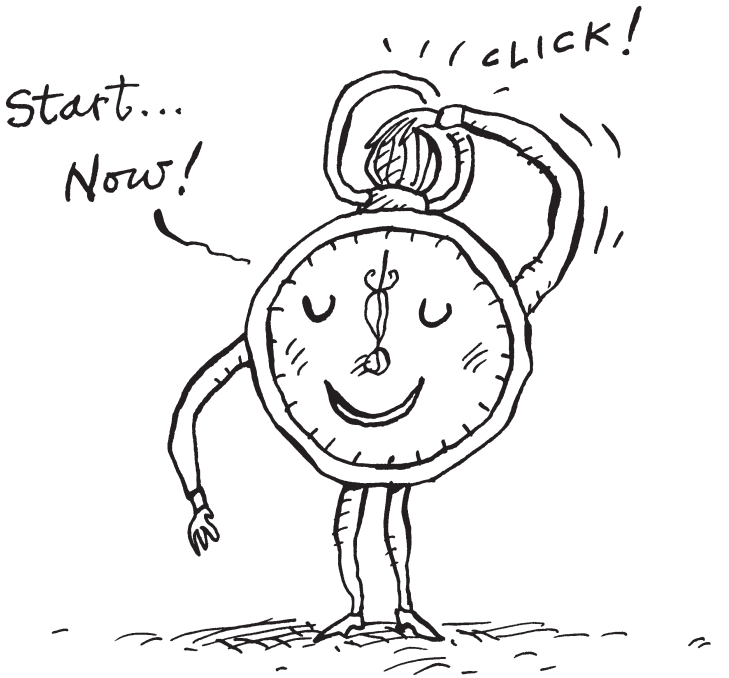
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By way of introduction –
if you've got five minutes to spare …

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JUST A MINUTE – IN JUST A MINUTE

Welcome to *Just A Minute*! That's how the show on the radio always starts, so I reckon the book should, too.

Just A Minute is the world's longest-running, fastest-moving, most amusing, most amazing panel game.

Oops! Someone has pressed a buzzer. They're interrupting me before I've even got into my stride.

Why?

Because, inadvertently, a moment ago, I repeated the word 'most'. The essence of *Just A Minute* is that it is a competitive entertainment in which the players are invited to speak on a set subject for 60 seconds without hesitation, deviation or repetition.

I did not hesitate. I got cracking from the get-go.

I have not deviated: the set topic is '*Just A Minute* – in just a minute' and, so far, I am bang on message.

But I did use the everyday term involving the four letters M, O, S and T and meaning the greatest in amount, quantity or degree, twice in quick succession and in *Just A Minute* that's not allowed.

If '*Just A Minute* – in just a minute' is what I have been asked to talk about, I can utter the phrase 'Just A Minute' as frequently as I please without penalty.

I am also permitted to employ little words such as 'in' and 'a' and 'I' and 'you' and 'but' and 'and' on multiple occasions, 'cos without them comprehensible discourse would be impossible.*

Get it? Got it. Good.

* That said, if I was telling the story of the sign-writer who had been asked to repaint the weather-beaten swinging board hanging outside the country pub and in doing so had left too much space between the 'The Plough' and 'and' and 'and' and 'and' and 'The Stars', five ands in a row is probably four too many. You get the idea? Don't worry, you will.

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HOW MANY WORDS IN JUST A MINUTE?

In that opening sally, I used 234 words. That's because I talk quite fast. I like to fill what the poet Rudyard Kipling called 'the unforgiving minute'. For most people, the average speed is four to five syllables per second. Most words are di- or tri-syllabic,* which means in everyday conversation the standard Jack and Jill will utter approximately five-score to 130 words per minute. A professional auctioneer in full flow, with gavel raised and adrenalin pumping – or, on a roll, the late, great Kenneth Williams, actor, raconteur, auto-didact and master of the art and craft of *Just A Minute* – could rattle through a half-millennium of words in 60 seconds with ease. There's research that shows the Welsh speak more quickly than the English, and New Yorkers faster than all other Americans. If you've heard me you'll know that I gabble away reasonably rapidly and, as you'll discover, I'm a bit of a sesquipedalian, too, meaning I'm partial to polysyllabic utterance. My minutes can therefore contain anything from 200 to almost 500 words. You need to know that this book comes with the guarantee that, without exception, every page can be spoken in just a minute.



* R Buzz! Buzz! Buzz! BAH! I've done it again. Two 'mosts' is too many. I repeated 'words' as well, of course, but that's allowed because the heading reads 'How many words in just a minute' so you can recycle those seven words as much as you please. Let me rephrase the opening of the offending sentence: 'Generally, words are two to three syllables long …'

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THE HISTORY OF *JUST A MINUTE* IN JUST A MINUTE

Just A Minute was first broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation on 22 December 1967. (The broadcaster is best known by its initials, but we can't use those here because to do so would require repeating the second letter of the alphabet, the one that traditionally appears between A and C.)

The game was devised by one of the great radio producers of the twentieth century: the late Ian Messiter (1920–99★), who claimed the idea came to him on the top of a London bus (a number 13, as luck would have it), when, out of the blue, he recalled a history master from his schooldays, who, catching him daydreaming in class, instructed him to repeat everything the teacher had said in the preceding minute, without hesitation or repetition. Adding 'deviation' as an extra offence, Mr M. used the format first in the 1950s, in a show called *One Minute, Please*, chaired by Roy Plomley, the inventor of another wireless classic, *Desert Island Discs*.

From the pilot onwards, for 52 glorious years, the actor, author, clock-collector and raconteur Nicholas Parsons (1923 to two thousand and twenty) graced the *Just A Minute* chair. Delightful, debonair, inimitable, he was succeeded by the equally effervescent and irresistible Sue Perkins, who has taken us through the one thousandth episode of the programme and beyond with a style that's as dazzling as it is bewitching. She is also irreproachably fair. She combines the judgement of Solomon and the acuity of Aristotle with the beauty of Helen of Troy.† Who could ask for anything more?

★ R We have already had 1967, so does 1920 involve a repetition of 19? It does, but just as 'yo-yo' is allowable because while the 'yo' is repeated within the word it forms part of just one word, we regard a whole date as one word. You could get away with 1919. You might even get away with, 'He turned 19 in 1919', but, obviously, 'All 19 of them turned 19 in 1919' would not be allowed. (Incidentally, while you're down here: everybody knows that 7 ate 9, but why? Because she needed to eat three squared meals a day, of course. Get it? Got it? Good.)

† In my experience of playing the game over more than 40 years, buttering up the chair is essential for survival.

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THE AUTHOR – IN JUST A MINUTE

My name is Gyles Brandreth and I first played *Just A Minute* on Wednesday, 2 December 1981, at the British Broadcasting Corporation's Paris Studios, located not in the French capital, despite the sign on the front door, but in the English one, in Lower Regent Street, London SW1. I've been lucky enough to be playing *Just A Minute* on the radio (and on the TV in the years when there was a telly version) ever since. The other competitors on that initial outing all those years ago were the irrepressible Kenneth Williams, the delightful Peter Jones, and someone who has since become one of my dearest friends, the actress Sheila Hancock. Dame S and I are now the two oldest and longest-serving living players of the game. My chum is formidable, fun and feisty, with a zest for life that is inspiring. As well as appearing together on *Just A Minute*, we have worked side by side* on a television series called *Celebrity Gogglebox* in which a variety of odd couples are filmed sitting on their sofas watching assorted programmes and chatting about them. With *CG* you don't get to choose what you view: you just watch whatever you're given. Viewing-wise, it can take you out of your comfort zone, which is sometimes challenging and occasionally alarming. We began filming during the COVID years and it did feel quite strange snuggling up on a settee at our age during a global pandemic, realising that we were both gradually getting hooked on a dating show featuring full-frontal nudity and neatly named *Naked Attraction*. And because my companion was nearing her nineties at the time, her eyesight was going a bit so we had to move our couch a little closer to the screen.†

* R Oops. Repetition. I meant to say 'we have worked alongside one another'.

† D Deviation! This page is supposed to be about the author and *Just A Minute*, not the author and *Naked Attraction*. (That said, you might be interested to know that because of our evident enthusiasm for *Naked Attraction*, both Dame Sheila and I were subsequently asked to go to Leeds to audition for *Celebrity Naked Attraction*. We went, we stripped off: Sheila got the gig and I didn't. Well, Sheila does have a particularly fetching pair of knees, I'm concerned, let me tell you, it was a very, *very* cold day.)

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PROSE & CONS: THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN JUST A MINUTE

As the philosopher Bertrand Russell once remarked, 'No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were poor but honest.' Only words can do that. Language is what makes us human. Your pet chihuahua could eat this book – your pet anaconda could devour it – but neither could read it. Language is what differentiates us from the rest of the animal kingdom.*

Why do I love playing *Just A Minute*? It's more than a genius game; it's also a celebration of the English language, the richest and most remarkable language in the world. It's so rich 'cos it isn't pure. It's a mongrel tongue. It accepts contributions from everywhere. The little canine I mentioned a moment ago is named after the Mexican state of the same name and that snake I referred to is so-called because there is a serpent with a similar-sounding nomenclature in Sri Lanka.

The geyser comes from Iceland (where we get our frozen foods, as it happens – but I mustn't deviate) and the bungalow derives from Hindi and means 'a house in the Bengali style'. You could say the English language is a fabulous linguistic mishmash, gallimaufry, olla podrida, smorgasbord or salmagundi (see page 284) – if the word hodgepodge, or even hotchpotch, didn't spring to mind.

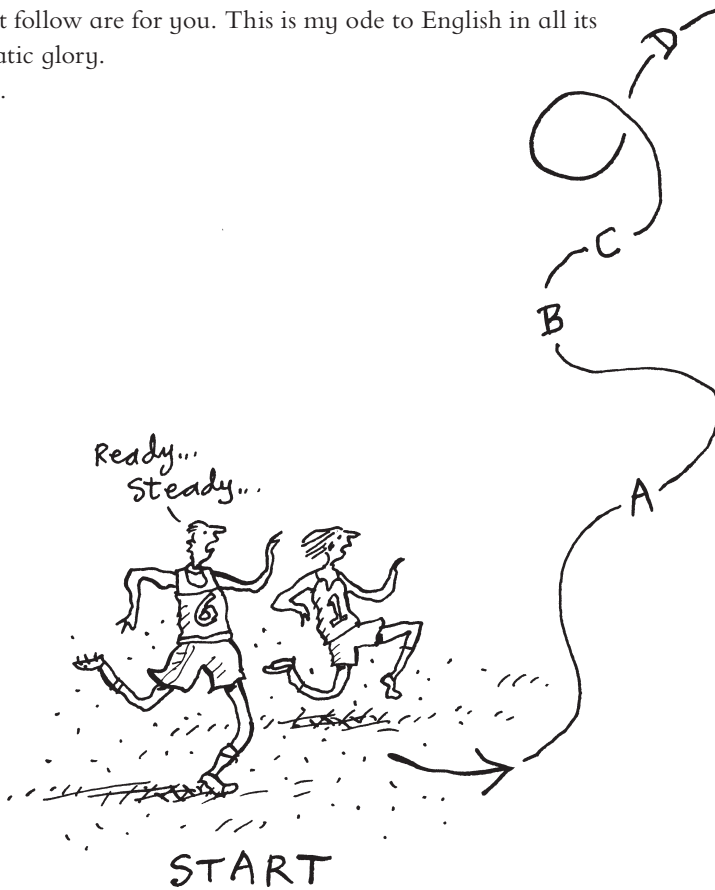
* Parrots are the exception to the rule, of course. Parrots have a special way with words. In honour of one much-missed occasional *Just A Minute* panellist, the late, great Barry Cryer, here is his favourite parrot joke:

> A woman walks past a pet shop and sees a magnificent parrot in the window. She rushes inside and says, 'How much for the parrot?' 'Five pounds,' says the shopkeeper. 'Only five pounds? I've got to have it,' says the woman. 'Why's it so cheap?' 'Well,' says the shopkeeper, 'I have to confess, it was brought up in a brothel, and, to put it politely, it has quite an extensive vocabulary.' 'Never mind,' says the woman. 'At that price, I'll take it.' So she takes the parrot home, puts its cage in the living room and takes the cover off. 'New place – very nice,' says the parrot. Then the woman's two daughters walk in. 'New place, new girls – very nice,' says the parrot. Then the woman's husband walks in, and the parrot says, 'Oh hello, Keith!'

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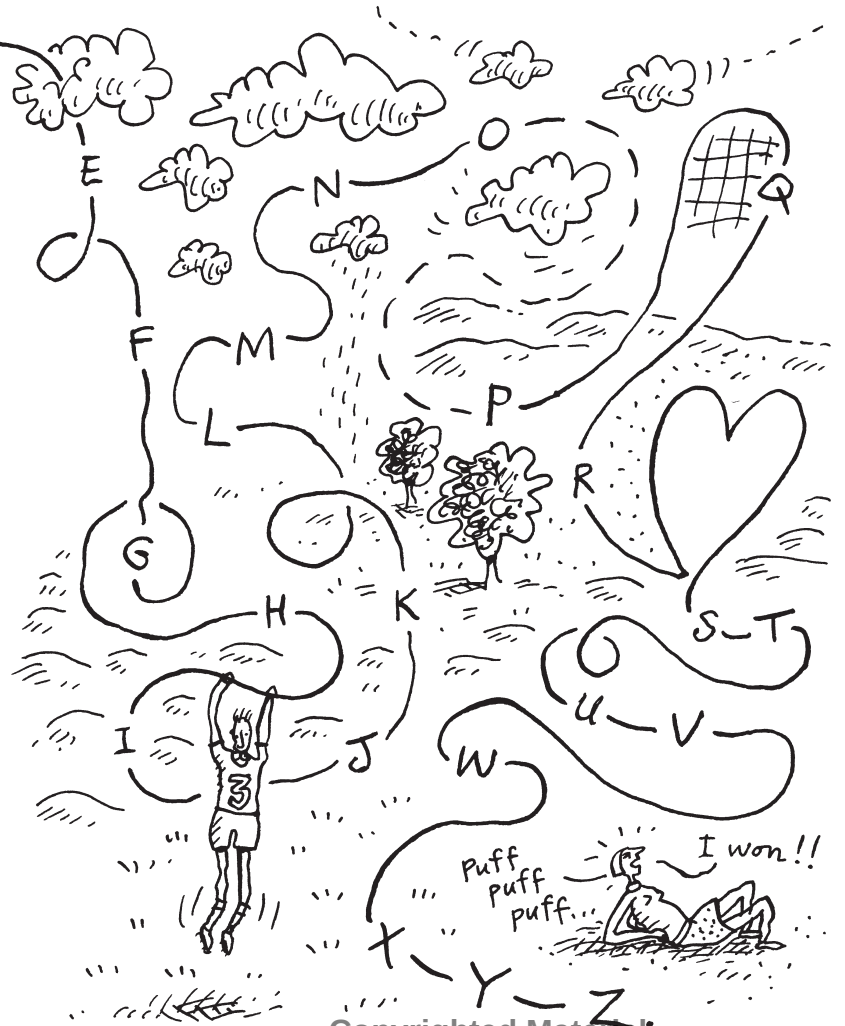
Without the English language, there would be no radio show called *Just A Minute* and no publication entitled *Prose & Cons: The English Language in Just A Minute.* Happily, English is the most-spoken language on earth – and the most-studied.* Around 400 million people are native English speakers and an additional 1.5 billion folk now use it as their second language. English is truly the *lingua franca* of the globe. Wherever you are on the planet, the pages that follow are for you. This is my ode to English in all its idiosyncratic glory.

Enjoy.



* R A canny player will insist there has been no repetition here, arguing that, thanks to the hyphens, 'most-spoken' and 'most-studied' are two distinct words. Good luck with that!

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To set the ball careering around the board of this polymorphic pinball parade through the English language, the starting point has to be the exploration and discovery of where our native tongue comes from. Here goes …

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IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning there was no beginning because the word 'beginning' hadn't been invented!* The same went for 'end' and every other linguistic exchange. Susie Dent, my podcasting colleague and doyenne of the dictionary in the popular British TV show *Countdown*, informs me that the roots of language lie in the very fundamentals of human existence: fear, food, fumbling by the fireside and the fun that followed. She reckons we have to go back 150,000 years, maybe a third as much again, to the time when cave dwellers began using simple sounds to express themselves meaningfully. Perhaps they were mimicking the noises made by animals and birds, the gurgle of running water, the rumble of thunder – in the same way that they were busy depicting the natural world all over the rocky walls of their troglodytic† homes. Their means of communication may have been mundane when set against the abundant legacy of verbal interchange that it spawned, but who is to say it was any less vital and engaging? After all, are we not recklessly reducing much of our present-day discourse to what amount to soundbites? X (formerly known as Twitter) marks the spot.

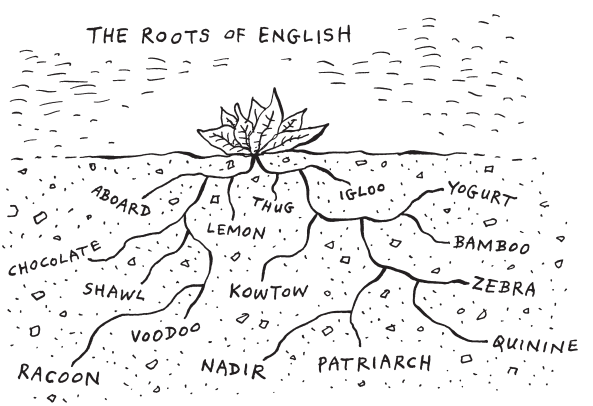
* R Bold move to contradict the topic at the very start. However, it could be a cunning ploy to throw other contestants off their guard while the speaker gets going. The clever (and completely legitimate) repetition of a word in the title gives the illusion that the speaker is on message, where in fact what is being said veers perilously close to a challenge for digression.

† R Nice employment of this adjective to avoid the risky repetition of 'cave'.

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WHO SPEAKS ENGLISH?

As I was saying only a moment or so ago, the answer is that an awful lot of people speak English: approximately one-fifth of the world's population. After the USA and the United Kingdom, India has 125,000,000 English speakers. Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, has just under half that total and Pakistan has slightly more than 33 per cent. Between 70 and 80* different countries have English as an official language. Add all these statistics together and English comes first among the planet's most-spoken lingos, breasting the tape ahead of Mandarin Chinese, with Hindi and Spanish coming third and fourth respectively. English is also the richest of what we now call personkind's 2,000 plus forms of oral and written communication. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two quarters of a million English words and these are boosted by an equivalent number of technical terms. Amongst our neighbouring European tongues English stands head and shoulders above the likes of German (with a vocabulary of 185,000) and French, which can't even muster six figures – and that's including shameless appropriations from English like: *le score*, *le shopping* and *le selfie*.



* R The actual number is 75, but stating it risks a challenge for the repetition of 'five', which occurs in the number given just a couple of lines above. Besides which, no one can dispute that 75 is between 70 and 80!

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ROOTS OF ENGLISH

The roots of English spread far and wide, spanning the globe.

To prove my point, here is a collection of 26 English words imported from other languages: aboard (Dutch), bamboo (Malay), chocolate (Nahuatl*), damask (Hebrew), emoji (Japanese), fakir (Arabic), gingham (Malaysian), hammock (Taíno), igloo (Inuit), jaguar (Guarani), kowtow (Mandarin), lemon (Arabic), mukbang† (Korean), nadir (from Arabia), orangutan (language of Malaysia), patriarch (Tamil), quinine (Quechua), racoon (Powhatan), shawl (Persian), thug (Hindi), ukulele (Hawaiian), voodoo (Ewe), yogurt (Turkish), zebra (Kikongo).

If further evidence were needed that English is a hybrid tongue, consider a popular dish found on menus in Indian restaurants everywhere: the vindaloo. A very hot curry made with meat or fish, this may have originated in the subcontinent, but its name is derived from two Portuguese roots, *vinho* (wine) and *alho* (garlic), which were originally mixed together to form the sauce. If I've got time may I recommend the chicken and sultana version of this delicacy served with a fragrant pilau at the Mumtaz restaurant in—‡

* What kind of language is that when it's at home? I'll tell you. Its home is Mexico where it was the *lingua franca* of the Aztecs between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. It's also still spoken by more than a million Mexicans.

† Mukbang – a live-streamed video broadcast, featuring a person eating a large quantity of food while addressing their audience, i.e. 'Did you see Auntie Shirley chowing down on the vat of vindaloo in last week's mukbang?' You couldn't make it up. I haven't. It's a global trend.

‡ D Buzz! Time's up; besides, not only was this a devotion but this is a BBC book and advertising is not permitted by the public service broadcaster.

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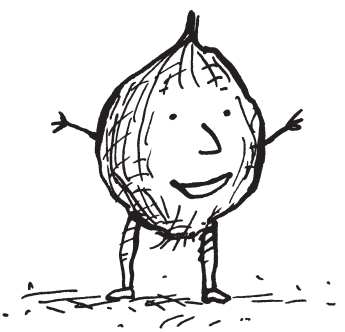
OLD ENGLISH

Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) dates from the earliest written records, around the year 740, to 1066. However, elements of Old English have stubbornly clung on, and survivors of its vocabulary are still in use today. Take for example: *freond*, *god*, *hond*, *ned*, *read*, *scip*, *springan*, *swete* and *wegan*, which hold their own in modern English respectively as: friend, good, hand, need, red, ship, to spring, sweet and to weigh.

One distinctive feature of Old English is the enjoyment its users got from riddles. Some were comparatively simple, like: 'What did Alfred the Great and Ivan the Terrible have in common?' (This isn't an authentic Old English conundrum, of course, because the latter gentleman wasn't born until 500 years after the A-S era, but the answer might have some scratching their heads. Got it? Their middle name: 'the'.)* Genuine Old English puzzles were genuinely better – for instance:

When I am alive I do not speak.
Anyone who wants to takes me captive and cuts off my head.
They bite my bare body.
I do no harm to anyone unless they cut me first.
Then I soon make them cry.

Any ideas?†



* R I love a silly riddle. Who goes 'Oh! Oh! Oh!'? Father Christmas walking backwards! Not allowed, of course, on grounds of repetition.

† An onion of course.

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MIDDLE ENGLISH

Middle English fills the linguistic space between Old English and Modern English, a time span from the Norman conquest, which began in 1066, to around 1500, when printing got going and started to standardise English. The really big change was the wholesale importation of great swathes of French vocabulary. A lot were associated with the Church and Christianity. That's how English acquired words such as: abbey, baptism, cardinal, confession, crucifix, redemption and temptation. Many came from the law and lawyers, as evinced by: assault, evidence, felon, fraud, justice, perjury, plaintiff, prison and punishment. And because Gallic couture and cuisine became all the rage, the vernacular of sophisticated continental taste and culture gained a foothold in English and continues to display itself in the likes of: boot, buckle, coat, frock, gown, mittens and – on the dining table – lemon, orange, peach and spice. One telling outcome was the social distinction between the names of livestock and the meat they produced. In the field, where they were tended by native serfs, the animals had Anglo-Saxon appellations: swine, calf, ox. Served as food, though, these were converted to the nomenclature of the ruling class from across the Channel: pork (*porc*), veal (*veau*) and beef (*boeuf*).

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THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

The Great Vowel Shift was a series of changes in pronunciation that took place primarily between 1400 and 1700. The Great Vowel Shift in English could so easily have been termed the Great Vowel Movement. While that might be just as accurate philologically, it would have been alarmingly perilous for bibulous bibliophiles at risk of bumbling in with a 'B'.*

What the Great Vowel Shift did for the way people spoke our native tongue might also have presented serious problems for anyone time-travelling back from the eighteenth century to the fifteenth. Fortunately, no one did (as far as we know) and the Great Vowel Shift passed virtually unnoticed except by a few language zealots.

The characters in question were the long vowels of Middle English, such as those in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer in particular. Before the Great Vowel Shift, they had the same auditory value as the ones in Latin and most modern European languages. For example, when Geoff wrote 'sheep', it would have been pronounced like the present-day 'shape'. By the reign of James I, however, the 'shift' had occurred and the letters in the aforementioned wool-producing ruminant would have sounded like those in 'meet' today.

No one knows for sure why the Great Vowel Shift happened, but it has well and truly mucked up English spelling ever since.

* Come to think of it, inadvertently leaving out the fourth letter of the fourth word in the term used in the title would be related to considerable awkwardness as well.

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NEW FOR OLD

Not all words keep their original meanings. A surprising number acquire new ones that are often strikingly different to their predecessors. Take 'ping' for instance. Until the advent of IT, it* was an onomatopoeic noun for the sound made by objects such as a ricocheting bullet, or the bell that used to be mounted on reception desks. These days it has switched to become the verb for making contact with someone by means of a text message. This change has come about recently, of course; others take far longer. Back in Shakespeare's time, a 'bully' was another way of referring to a sweetheart and a 'matrix' was a female breeding animal. Sticking with livestock, 'egregious' originally meant surpassing, or illustrious, thanks to the Latin phrase that gave rise to it, which translates as 'out of the flock'. Four centuries later, it has done a complete *volte face* and describes something that is outstandingly bad. On the other hand, 'nice' has gone in the opposite direction. In the 1300s its meaning was foolish or wanton, a far cry from the pleasing employment it has today, as in that heart-warming motoring programme that shows the enjoyment of driving in untrammelled countryside: *Nice Road Truckers*.†

* R Cleverly played, but cheeky, juxtaposition of IT (in caps) and it (lowercase), employing precisely the same pair of letters but to create completely different words. Fingers poised to buzz for repetition must remain frustratingly poised.

† R Repetition of 'Nice' – but used in the final three words so you might just get away with it. In my time, I am proud to say I have got away with using 'nice' meaning 'nice' and 'Nice' meaning the city. Nice biscuit that comes from the southern French city of Nice.

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BACK TO BASIC

You might well think that getting 'back to basic' is either a typo (shouldn't 'basic' be plural?) or a return to the very earliest form of English. However, I regret to inform you that you would be wrong on both counts.

Basic is an bacronym (and there's more to be found about them on page 62) which stands for: British, American Scientific, International and Commercial. So, before leaving these pages describing where our language comes from, take a look at one that was devised to be easy to learn, while being capable of facilitating every kind of communication. Given that Basic has a vocabulary of just 850 words drawn from our mother tongue, that does seem a pretty tall order, but its creators were nothing if not optimistic.

Basic has 600 things (nouns), 150 qualities (adjectives) and 100 operators (verbs), and when you read how it renders the opening of the Lord's Prayer, you'll understand why the *lingua franca* we know and love was never under serious threat:

Father of all up in the sky
You get our deepest respect.
We hope your nation with you
asking for ruler will come
down to us.

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Apricity

Prose & Cons: The English Language in Just A Minute is a rich feast and in order to savour all that follows I'm offering a palate cleanser between each round in the form of an intellectual sorbet ('a sweet food made from fruit juice, water and sugar mixed together and frozen' that a hundred years ago was known as an 'Arabian ice', but is now known as a canny way of extracting good money from naive people happy to pay over the odds for a small ball of flavoured frozen water): by which I mean a word that I know and like and want to share.

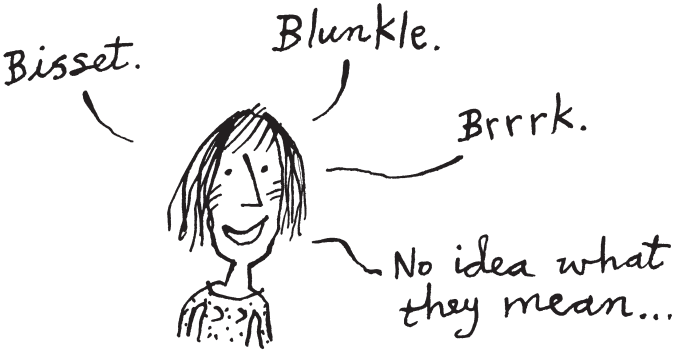
And share it, too, without having to stick to the rules of *Just A Minute*. We are between rounds here. And between friends. So anything goes. As a first offering, let me present a lovely word that cheers me whenever I come across it, for reasons that will be immediately apparent.

I was introduced to 'apricity' by my friend Susie Dent, my podpanion* and a lexical luminary whose learning and knowledge of the English language are a constant source of inspiration, enlightenment and entertainment. It's a word that was first recorded in 1623 where it described 'the warmness of the Sunne in Winter'. Apricity is the noun derived from the verb 'apricate': to bask in the sun or expose to sunlight. The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes the works of the essayist Thomas De Quincey as a source, writing in the 1850s. Tom De Q, however, inadvertently implies an ambiguity in the definition (unintentional I'm sure), when he refers to the man he is describing, 'Not sunning but mooning himself'. Possibly realising how this could be misconstrued, he hastily adds, 'apricating himself in the occasional moonbeams'. Since there is something of a contradiction at work here, I leave it to you to decide what the gentleman in question was actually up to.

* A word coined by Susie Dent on the weekly podcast we have been doing together since the early 2020s: *Something Rhymes with Purple*. It's so-called because, while I thought there wasn't a word that rhymes with 'purple', Susie explained to me that there is. To implied to walk with a limp. She hasn't yet satisfied me that there is a word that rhymes with 'orange'. Or 'silver'.

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SOME NEW WORDS
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