15

COIN A NEW WORD

In 2007, at PodCamp Pittsburgh 2, a social media "unconference," some geeks were sitting around discussing web technology—and going off on tangents. According to Andy Quayle, one of the participants, "We were talking about different meats and international types of bacon and were receiving messages on our mobile devices and eventually the two mixed." A new word was born: *bacn*, which the group defined as 'email you want—but not right now.' *Bacn* refers to the email we sign up to receive—notifications from Facebook, beta announcements from startups, etc.—and never get around to reading. Bacn is spam's tastier cousin.

Being geeks, these neologists—that is, creators of *neologisms*, or new words—made a website to promote their word and asked bloggers to write about it. Their promotional efforts paid off. *Bacn* became a story. Not everyone liked the new word. Some commenters on the Bacn website pointed out that bacon, the food, is simply too delicious to serve as a good metaphor for email

you never get around to reading. But the story of Bacn spread. It was covered by CNET, *InformationWeek*, *New Scientist* magazine, National Public Radio, *Wired* magazine, and even *People* magazine.

Bacn was coined to attract attention, communicate instantly, and be remembered and repeated. It worked. Notice the big story wasn't that people sign up to receive email and then don't read it. The story was that someone had come up with a funny, catchy *name* for the common phenomenon that makes us see it in an interesting light. Neologisms can be among the most powerful of micromessages.

Coined words come in many varieties. There are political epithets like *Defeatocrat*; terms for new technologies and cultural phenomena like *podcast*, *greenwash*, and of course *bacn*; proprietary names for companies and products, such as *Skype*, *Technorati*, *Wii*, and more.

Almost all new words, from tech company names to political insults, result from a handful of processes familiar to linguists. Most of these processes are green: they reuse or recycle existing words. Here are seven common ways to build a new word:

1. Reuse an existing word (*Apple*, *spam*)
2. Create a new compound word by sticking two words together (*YouTube*, *website*)
3. Create a blend by combining part of a word with another word or word part (*Technorati*, *Defeatocrat*)
4. Attach a prefix or a suffix to a word (*Uncola*, *Feedster*)
5. Make something up out of arbitrary syllables (*Bebo*)
6. Make an analogy or play on words (*Farecast*, *podcast*)
7. Create an acronym (*GUBA*, *scuba*)

Making up a new word doesn't have to mean creating a new sound; it can also mean putting an existing sound to new use.

People often don't think of these as neologisms, but the end result is essentially a new word. Remember, a word isn't just a sound or a handful of letters; what makes it interesting, what makes it a *word*, is that it has a meaning. When people use the word *word*, they sort of vacillate between meaning just the spoken and written form on the one hand, and the form plus the meaning on the other. For this reason, lexical semanticists—linguists who really take words seriously—don't even find the word *word* very useful. They use different terms when they're talking about the form alone and when they're talking about the form plus its meaning.

To put a special mark of ownership on a repurposed word, you can respell it. Respelling words serves some technical functions: as we saw in the last chapter, it makes them easier to trademark (as in Rice Krispies, Cheez Whiz, and Krazy Glue), it often creates a unique keyword to increase search engine visibility (as in Squidoo), and it sometimes makes it possible to acquire a meaningful ".com" domain (as in Topix, a localized news service). But respelling comes at a cost: you run the risk of seeming stupid or cheesy, or being confusing.

One of the best respelling techniques eliminates letters that aren't necessary for pronunciation. This approach achieves spelling economy, a desirable quality in a name. Flickr, for example, eliminates the *e* in the common *-er* ending. Eliminating letters that are not pronounced is a natural move, and one that children often do. At the end of his kindergarten year, my son Tobias unwittingly coined a Web 2.0 name when he described himself in a written report as "organisd."

Reusing a word—that is, giving it a new meaning—can change it forever in people's minds. *Spam*, once a brand name for a humble canned meat product, provides a perfect example. Recycling words—recombining them into new, larger units, sometimes breaking them down into their component pieces first—offers almost limitless possibilities for new coinages.

Coining words is an English literary tradition. William Shakespeare was an avid neologist. Some words that we still use today, and many others that we don't, made their first appearance in one of his plays. Shakespeare's interest in new words was poetic rather than informational, however; he strove less to name new ideas than to express old ones so that they fit the cadences of his characters' voices. The poetic use of neologism goes back even further in the history of our language. Old English epic poems such as *Beowulf* contained numerous *kennings*, fanciful compounds that replaced simple nouns with sometimes riddlelike descriptions. For example, a ship might be described as a "sea-steed," or blood as "slaughter-dew."

Words coined for special occasions without any concern for their permanence are called *nonce* words. Perhaps one of the best known coiners of English nonce words is Lewis Carroll. Many people have encountered his nonsensical poem "Jabberwocky," which appears in the book *Through the Looking Glass* and is filled with words of Carroll's invention:

> *Twas brillig, and the slithy toves*
> *Did gyre and gimble in the wabe*
> *All mimsy were the borogoves*
> *And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Humpty Dumpty later explains to Alice the meaning of part of this poem:

> *Well, "slithy" means "lithe and slimy." "Lithe" is the same as "active." You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed into one word.*

He also explains that *mimsy* is a blend of *miserable* and *flimsy*.

We now have other, less literary reasons to create new words.

They help us keep pace with the rapid rate of change in science, technology, business, and society. Neologism is such a salient feature of tech-obsessed American culture that there's a feature in *Wired* magazine devoted to it. The web makes tracking new words much easier than it was in the past. Several websites, such as Word Spy, are devoted solely to spotting and documenting neologisms.

Good neologisms sound fresh and perfectly natural at the same time. Naturalness results from respecting the normal cadences of speech and the sounds of the words used, as well as the meanings and grammatical functions of the component parts. Biznik, the name of a social network for independent businesspeople, is a perfect use of the Yiddish-derived suffix *-nik*, which attaches to nouns and describes people who have an affinity for what the noun names (*beatnik*, *peacenik*).

It's surprising how many new words are poorly constructed. The old IBM computer name Aptiva sounds odd if you think of it as consisting of the word *apt* and the suffix *-ive* with a Latinate vowel at the end. The *-ive* suffix attaches to verbs to make adjectives (*creative* from *create*, *divisive* from *divide*, etc.), but *apt* is already an adjective, so Aptiva just seems a little off.

Neologism is the ultimate in microstyle, because it involves poking around under the hood of words and tinkering with their internal structure. Even if you just stick two words together to make a compound, as in YouTube, you create a word-internal syllable boundary, which can be a sticking point in pronunciation. But what really calls for some finesse with verbal mechanics is the blend word, or *portmanteau*.

In a well-constructed portmanteau, two component words blend together seamlessly through a phonetic overlap or similarity. Consider the word *vegangelical*, a blend of *evangelical* and *vegan*. While *vegan* doesn't rhyme with the first two syllables of *evangelical*, it does have the same vowel sounds (when *evangelical* has a fully unemphasized and neutral second vowel). There's also a shared "v" sound, even though it occurs in a slightly different place. The result of combining these words is apt, both semantically and phonologically. Another interesting blend is *adhocracy*, a combination of *ad hoc* and *democracy*.

Bad blends try to squish words together in unnatural ways. Foodportunity, a networking event for food journalists, got its terrible name when someone stuck the whole word *food* into a spot previously occupied by a syllable consisting of only a single vowel. The huge phonetic difference between these two parts makes the neologism sound unnatural. Other bad blends fail to preserve the patterns of syllable emphasis of their component words. I like to call this phenomenon *awkwordplay*, a blend of *awkward* and *wordplay*, because that name actually demonstrates the phenomenon. If you try to pronounce the word *awkward* correctly, with no emphasis on the second syllable, then *wordplay* sounds all wrong. If you pronounce *wordplay* correctly, with emphasis on the first syllable, *awkward* gets all messed up. There's no nice, natural way to pronounce this word. A real example of awkwordplay is the name Teensurance, for a teen insurance policy from Safeco. The one-syllable word *teen* requires its own emphasis, but it replaces the unemphasized first syllable of *insurance*, resulting in a clunky name.

Perhaps the easiest way to create a new word is to simply stick two existing words together to make a compound. Political appellations that use this pattern include *wingnuts* (extreme right-wingers), *moonbats* (extreme lefties), and *Islamofascists* (which uses the classical compound-forming *o* to connect its two parts).

THE WORD FACTORY

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher we met in Chapter 8, compared the lexicon of a language to an old city. The grammati-

cal words—auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and such—he likened to the ancient city center. There you find odd nooks and crannies that have been preserved for centuries. The vocabularies of mathematics and other technical fields he compared to orderly new subdivisions. To extend the analogy in an obvious way, brand names, URLs, and other such purpose-driven neologisms are the storefronts in the bustling commercial strips and shopping malls of the language. New ones pop up all the time, and a few succeed and become enduring parts of the landscape.

Brand names, in particular, are an interesting species. Unlike most other neologisms, they sometimes seem to be made out of whole cloth: Nerf, Kodak, Oreo. They're highly artificial, designed with great care for commercial purposes, but they're bona fide words of our language. Some even make the transition from proper noun to common noun or even verb ("googled" anyone lately?). Consider some of the words that started life as proprietary names: *cellophane*, *granola*, *jungle gym*, *martini*, *minivan*, *novocaine*, *pablum*, *pancake makeup*, *xerox*. The list goes on.

Names don't just represent brands; they *start* brands. The ideas and feelings that a name evokes provide the scaffolding for a brand. Consider the name Google. Even if you don't know it's based on *googol*, a word coined by a child for a very large number, you probably get a playful, almost goofy vibe from it. Maybe you associate it (consciously or not) with the cartoon character Barney Google, the expression "googly eyes," or representations of baby talk like "goo goo ga ga." Now think of how well that vibe goes with Google's simple interface, the primary colors of its logo, and its reputation as a fun and creative place to work. Now try to imagine the same logo and reputation being associated with the name Microsoft. Microsoft countered Google's playfulness with a fun search engine name of its own: Bing.

Of course, many names are new coined words (or phrases). Most are created using the same processes that give birth to other

new words. People combine existing words, and parts of words, to create new words. Take the word *job*, stick on the suffix *-ster*, and you've got the name Jobster. Blend the words *technology* and *literati* (or *digerati*) and you've got the name Technorati. And so on.

Usually people take the raw material of our natural shared language to construct artificial words, but today's linguistic environment is so crowded with artificial words that they've become part of the raw material. Take the name Jobdango. Why is that dang *-dango* ending dangling there? You could argue that this name blends *job* and *fandango*, the name of a dance. But there's really no sensible motivation for such a blend. Rather, this name seems to be a blend of *job* and the *name* Fandango, for a website that sells movie tickets. The name Fandango is based on the word for the dance, but it's kind of a pun, because the site is for movie *fans*. Jobdango seems to be sort of a nod to the movie ticket site; it says, "I'm like Fandango for jobs."

So the artificial word *Fandango*, based on the natural word *fandango*, becomes the raw material for the artificial word *Jobdango*. The artificial is built out of the artificial. It's like what you find in music with sampling, or in food with the Dairy Queen Blizzard, which uses candy bars as raw ingredients in milkshakes. And now *-dango* has taken on a life of its own, appearing in names like Handango, Zoodango, and even GodDango. It has become what linguists call a *cranberry morpheme*, a meaningless word part that, like *cran-*, is left when you chop a meaningful part off a word.

The *-dango* phenomenon shows the historical process of language change being initiated and accelerated through naming. It invites another analogy to biological evolution: naming is to language change as breeding is to evolutionary change in domestic animals. Humans speed up and direct the process of evolution by selecting for traits that they like in their animal companions—random variation and artificial selection, if you will. It's similar with naming. For the most part it works with word formation

strategies that lead to language change organically but accelerate the process through conscious human choice. The emergence of the *-dango* cranberry morpheme is a good example. It's possible to imagine a historical scenario in which the name Fandango is reanalyzed by speakers as including the word *fan*, and that leads to the emergence of the *-dango* suffix in an organic way.

Where will this process lead? The crowded space of names might create a need for more complex ways to create names. A blend, for example, is normally made out of just two seamlessly combined words, but it can be made out of three. The second part of the name Bare Escentuals manages to combine the words *essential*, *scent*, and *sensual*. A company in Seattle is called Fabjectory, which is a blend of *fabject* and *object*. But *fabject* itself is a blend of *fabricated* and *object*, coined by science fiction writer Bruce Sterling. This is a complicated name, but complexity is a natural adaptation to a challenging environment.

THE VERBAL REAL ESTATE MARKET

Just how competitive is the space of names? In 2006 there were already more than six million businesses in the United States (and more than half a million new ones were created that year alone). Of course, every one of them has a name.

The US Patent and Trademark Office has over a million and a half active trademark registrations, and more than 350,000 new registrations were filed in 2009. To put that into perspective, by some estimates the average English-speaking adult knows about 40,000 words. The number of active US trademarks is more than thirty times larger than the common English vocabulary (and the number of existing business names is about six times the number of active trademarks).

As daunting as the number of business names and trademarks

is, things look even worse when you consider the web. Naming is no longer just for corporate marketing departments and entrepreneurs who invest their life savings in a business. It's for everyone with an interest in personal branding. And that's everyone. This is the age of blogs, micro-startups, and eBay stores run by people in their pajamas. All these projects need names.

This universal participation makes naming more difficult than ever. The web is now a crucial marketing platform, and naming means finding available Internet domain names. The vast universe of existing domain names makes it difficult to be both meaningful and distinctive.

Internet infrastructure company VeriSign reports that by the fourth quarter of 2009, over eighty million ".com" domains were registered and 192 registrations across all the top-level domains (".org," ".net," etc.), with about eleven million new registrations made in the last quarter of 2009. According to Technorati CEO David Sifry's report "The State of the Live Web" for 2007, there were more than seventy million blogs, and 120,000 new ones were created every day.

As the forces driving the artificial growth of our vocabulary grow stronger, things are looking bright for neologism.

16

MAKE A PLAY ON WORDS

Sometimes coining a new word means making a play on an existing word. Farecast, the original name for Bing Travel, a service that predicts airfares, is a play on *forecast*. The name Gnomedex is a comical play on the name Comdex, which was once a popular technology conference.

Wordplay is a staple of songwriters as well as copywriters. John Lennon and Paul McCartney (especially Lennon) were lovers of wordplay, and that's apparent in much of the Beatles' work. Two of their pivotal albums, which some critics place among the most influential in rock history, use wordplay in their titles. *Rubber Soul* is of course a play on the phrase *rubber sole*, a type of shoe sole. As Beatles lore has it, Paul McCartney heard a black musician describe Mick Jagger's singing as "plastic soul," which he interpreted to mean 'white people's soul,' and that inspired the pun. And *Revolver* seems to be an aggressive reference to a weapon, but it can also be a fanciful description of an LP on a turntable. And let's not forget that the name Beatles itself is a play

on the words *beat* and *beetles*. Lennon really cut loose with wordplay of another sort in his book *In His Own Write*. Here's what he wrote in his "About the Awful" section on the back:

> *As far as I'm conceived this correction of short writty is the most wonderful larf I've ever ready.*

Rough going unless you *really* love wordplay.

A good play on words, like any coinage, must respect the normal cadences of speech and the sounds of the words used as raw material in a coinage. It's surprising how many new words fail to do that.

Consider this headline from *BusinessWeek*: "The New E-spionage Threat." The coined word *e-spionage* refers to spying that takes place over the Internet. Saying this word out loud almost hurts. The word *espionage* has a short *e* that grabs the following *s* and makes it part of the first syllable. The long *e* in *e-spionage* makes a whole syllable by itself, so the *s* becomes part of the second syllable, which is pronounced "spee." The result sounds awkward and silly. This would be "eye wordplay," similar to eye rhyme and eye ambiguity.

Another poorly constructed word is *Defeatocrats*—the epithet that former White House Press Secretary Tony Snow coined in 2006 to characterize Democratic opposition to the war in Iraq. Conservative bloggers echoed the term for a while. Liberal bloggers proposed some terrible rejoinders, one of which was *Republicants*.

Neither of these new words really caught on. One reason is their poor construction. *Defeatocrat* sounds like a random schoolyard insult, largely because there's no linguistic or conceptual motivation for replacing the first single syllable of *Democrat* with the two-syllable word *defeat*, apart from Snow's desire to make the Democrats look weak.

Republicant might elicit a brief chuckle, but it falls flat because the final syllable of *Republican* just isn't pronounced emphatically the way the word *can't* should be here. This is one of the most common causes of failed wordplay—syllable stress mismatch, which I christened *awkwordplay* in the preceding chapter. The names Carticipate, Mapufacture, Syncplicity, and Teensurance all contain one-syllable words (*car*, *map*, *sync*, *teen*). In any playful coinage like this, people would expect the one-syllable words to be stressed, but in these names, they replace unstressed syllables of longer words. The results sound strained and unpleasant.

Wordplay occurs in slogans as well as names. Amtrak tells us TO SEE AMERICA AT SEE LEVEL. (In a failed attempt at similar wordplay, the movie *Ghost Ship* used the tagline SEA EVIL, which doesn't make much sense or sound natural under either interpretation.) Nabisco asks us, WHY SNACKRIFICE? Picking up on the snack food industry's penchant for wordplay, the *Onion* reported that

> FRITOLAYSIA CUTS OFF CHIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH SNAKISTAN

This playful headline from 2005 prefigured the much-publicized "snacklish" ad campaign for Snickers, created in 2009 by TBWA/Chiat/Day. The campaign was based completely on wordplay, featuring invented words such as *hungerectomy* and *satisfectellent*.

Plays on words can be based on spelling. The email service Xobni is *inbox* spelled backward. The name Hotmail was originally HoTMaiL, based on *HTML*. Tputh, the name of an online news magazine for "geeks, designers, and venture capitalists," was inspired partly by the Cyrillic spelling of *Pravda*'s English equivalent.

Publishers have really taken to wordplay in their book titles. There is, of course, the wildly successful *Freakonomics*, and its sequel *Super Freakonomics* (you can almost hear Rick James singing, "It's super freaky!"). Other recent titles include *Shoptimism* and *Moregasm*.

Many noncommercial neologisms are instances of wordplay. Instead of controversies, newspapers sometimes like to write about *nontroversies*—things that seem really urgent for a day or two, and then . . . wait, what were we talking about? And we don't just have activists anymore—we also have *Blacktivists* and *hacktivists*. Rolf Sten Andersen proposed the following neologism on Twitter:

> *Fauxboes: The annoying kids on Haight Street that endlessly harass you for money.*
>
> — *@RSAndersen, quoted in* Twitter Wit

Sometimes words are toys. Add a little playtime to your microstyle.

17

COMBINE WORDS ARTFULLY

When we put together a simple phrase or a noun compound, we have to not only choose words, but decide which words go together. Words are like ingredients, and when you combine them, you can create dishes that have never existed before.

In the late 1970s a guy named Eric met a guitarist through a music store ad and formed the politically confrontational band the Dead Kennedys. Thinking, perhaps, that Eric was not an outrageous enough stage name for the lead singer of such a band, he became known as Jello Biafra.

The name Jello Biafra is a masterpiece of microstyle, a testament to the power that the juxtaposition of two simple words can unleash. *Jello* is, of course, the genericized trademark for a gelatin dessert product (Jell-O). *Biafra* was the name of a secessionist state in Nigeria in the 1960s. If you know about Biafra, you can't see these two words together without thinking about the huge disparities between life in the United States and in the rest of the world. Jello is highly processed and nutritionally frivolous—food as a toy.

Biafra was a place where tens of thousands of people starved to death because of a military blockade during the Nigerian Civil War. Combining those two ideas makes one uncomfortably aware of the grotesque excesses of American life, and that was part of Eric's point.

Not all new verbal dishes are as pungent as Jello Biafra. Consider the name Blue Flavor, for a Seattle web design firm. This simple two-word combination evokes an idea that's far more unusual and intriguing than the meaning of either component word alone.

To interpret any phrase like this, we start with the words and then figure out how to fit their meanings together. The words themselves help with this process. Some words exist just to combine with others in certain ways; they give our brains instructions, so to speak, about how to begin the meaning construction process. In this case, the adjective *blue*, occurring before a noun, tells us that it should modify the noun—change its meaning in a certain way. The noun *flavor* violates our expectations in this regard. Color words modify words for things that have colors, such as *wall*, *chair*, or *shirt*. *Flavor* is not such a word.

Let's try indirect association (*metonymy*) to interpret this name. Colors don't literally have flavor, but there are certain canonical color-flavor associations. Makers of jelly beans, slushy drinks, and other artificially colored foods use these all the time. Yellow for lemon. Purple for grape. Red for cherry or strawberry. Orange for orange, of course. Green for lime or mint or maybe green apple. But missing from this list is blue. In his monologue for the very first episode of *Saturday Night Live*, the late, great George Carlin bemoaned the absence of blue food. Even blueberries, he observed, are "blue on the vine, purple on the plate."

Blue Flavor names a mythical taste that doesn't exist. Something you've never experienced before. It's a great idea for a web design studio to evoke, and it shows the power of putting words—even just two of them—together.

Surprising word combinations aren't just for punk rockers and web designers. Recall the compound "Jesus rifles" used in the headline discussed in Chapter 1. A compound or phrase gives you an opportunity to create new meaning, to make your message more than the sum of its parts. Some messages represent lost opportunities. Consider the name for a company that wants to build an elevator that goes into outer space. An elevator to space—pretty cool, right? The name is LiftPort. Lifting is carrying, porting is carrying, a lift is a kind of conveyance, a port is a place of departure. Combining these words hits the same overly general and uninspiring meanings again and again, neglecting more interesting ideas like outer space, science fiction, and doing the impossible.

Compounds are very common in English and come naturally to people. There are a few things to keep in mind, however, when creating them. The most important is that the second word in the compound will be interpreted as the "head"—the word with the key meaning that will represent the category of the compound as a whole. An airport is a type of a port, not a type of air, and the White House is a type of house, not a kind of white. This may be intuitively obvious, but I've often observed people ignoring this fact when they tackle the naming challenge by generating long lists of randomly combined words.

Since the second word is the head, the first one is typically a modifier. That means it will modify, or change, the meaning of the head in some way. It's important to pick a word that's up to the task. There aren't many grammatical constraints to worry about here; concern yourself with what makes sense.

While phrases represent a step up in complexity from compounds, phrase making is still built on word selection and therefore on the kind of framing that words can achieve. For example, in 2008 the US Justice Department announced a new initiative to get tough on *tax defiers*. These are people, previously known as *tax protesters*, who question the legal validity of federal taxation and refuse to file taxes. The new phrase *tax defiers* accomplishes two things. First, it grabs attention because it's unfamiliar. Second, it completely reframes the activity of the people in question. The word *protesters* evokes the idea of people exercising their constitutional rights to fight for a just cause. The word *defiers*, on the other hand, implies people who stubbornly resist just authority. Parents talk about their children being *defiant* when they refuse to go to bed or clean up after themselves.

Titles of movies and books sometimes put words together in surprising ways to present intriguing or fanciful ideas. Gus Van Sant made a great film about small-time crooks and drug addicts in the 1970s Pacific Northwest. He called it *Drugstore Cowboy*. Not two words you'd expect to find together (unless you happened to be at Wall Drug in South Dakota), but the title referred to the Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch characters' freewheeling lifestyle and penchant for robbing drugstores to score barbiturates. The book and movie *A Clockwork Orange* uses part of an old cockney expression to evoke the surreal world it depicts.

Incongruous word combinations can also be played for laughs. Here's a headline from the *Onion*:

CASES OF GLITTER LUNG ON THE RISE AMONG ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL ART TEACHERS

The heart of this joke is, of course, the phrase "glitter lung," which bears a vague resemblance to "black lung," the name of a serious condition that miners suffer as a result of inhaling coal dust. The dark humor of the *Onion* headline plays on the implicit comparison between miners, who work in dark, gloomy, and dangerous conditions, and elementary school teachers, who work in rooms filled with toys, primary colors, and children. The phrase "glitter lung" expressed this comparison in miniature.

Sometimes a simple word combination, or even a combination of a prefix and a word, serves as a euphemism for a more familiar word in a lame attempt to make something bad look good—to put lipstick on a pig, if you will. Have you noticed that it's hard to buy a used car nowadays? That's because cars are no longer used, they're "pre-owned." *Used* implies used up, while the term *pre-owned* suggests that someone has kindly gone to the trouble of testing out ownership of a vehicle to ensure that everything's OK. The most ridiculous euphemism I've encountered lately is *pre-reclined*, used by Spirit Airlines to describe the nonadjustable seats in its new Airbus A320s. Just imagine a flight attendant dealing with a confused customer asking how to make his seat go down: "Sir, our seats are pre-reclined, which means you're already comfortable!"

Combining words is really about combining concepts. Doing that well means paying attention to what makes sense, avoiding redundancy, and creating interesting juxtapositions.

18

USE GRAMMAR EXPRESSIVELY

One of the surest signs that we've entered the era of the micromessage has been the emergence of a new comedy genre: the fake newspaper headline. The *Onion*, which has provided many of the examples in this book, is a veritable humor factory that began as a small campus publication in Madison, Wisconsin. It built its empire largely on the strength of its satirical headlines. It has articles as well, but they're usually extended riffs on a basic concept that's expressed best in headline form. The front page of its news publication also features headlines for stories that don't even exist. The headlines are where the action is. That makes the *Onion*'s style of humor perfect for Twitter, where it had more than two million followers when I wrote this.

The *Onion* manages to crank out reliably funny headlines again and again, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it uses obvious formulas to do it. One formula combines an ancient rhetorical trope with the abbreviated syntactic conventions of newspaper