

## Molluscs of mass destruction

□ It is a crime against humanity when professional communicators manage to get language so horribly muddled, says Henry Gee.

Henry Gee

For the past few weeks I've been busy completing a book, and so haven't had much time to listen to the radio, nor watch TV. But now, having switched back on to these means of mass communication, it seems that news and current-affairs shows have been taken over by a horde of lexical barbarians whose mission seems to be to assault my ears with a barrage of grammatical and stylistic solecisms.

The worst is the persistent mispronunciation of the word 'nuclear' as 'nucula', as in 'the prospect of Iran acquiring nucula weapons'. As every schoolboy knows, or would do, were it a character in a computer game, *Nucula nucleus* is a species of small, inoffensive clam commonly found at the seaside.

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It was given its name in the eighteenth century by Linnaeus, the pioneer of taxonomy, presumably as a formal version of its vernacular name, which in Linnaeus' native Swedish is *nötmussla* or *nötkämmussla*, and in English is the common nut shell. Why? Because the creature looks like a small nut. In the sense of atoms, the word 'nuclear' refers to the nucleus or kernel of the atom (hence the German *Kernphysik* for nuclear physics), whence it is plain that the term derives from a metaphor: the nucleus is the hard nut within the greater and more diffuse fruit of the atom as a whole.

That the roots of the words *nucula* and *nucleus* are substantially the same cannot, however, be used as an excuse by journalists who confuse one with the other. That President George W. Bush has exercised the *nucula* option is well known, but it is a matter of concern that it is made repeatedly by people whom one expects really ought to know what they're talking about.

To a zoologist, the effect of hearing this particular error is to project one into a surreal world in which ambitious nations develop dreadful weapons in which fusillades of small shellfish are fired at assailants, presumably from giant pea-shooters.

### Sdhhv

Were this the sole source of my irritation, I could possibly live with it. But there are other such instances. Oh, so many others.

Several fall into the category of meaningless stuffing, in which speakers who are somewhat light of brain pad out a sentence while their feeble minds try to catch up with the sense of their discourse. This includes the pithy use of 'sort of', usually pronounced *sdhhv*, as if it were the sound made by a runaway truck ploughing into several tonnes of cold porridge.

The worst offender, in my view, emerges from an unholy miscegenation between verbal stuffing and the lamentable poverty of vocabulary displayed in most interviews: it is the overuse of the word 'absolutely', usually with considerable emphasis, when the interviewee agrees with a proposition set out by the interviewer. This crops up in those frequent cases in which the interviewer wastes valuable time by repeating the answer to the previous question, for example: Interviewee: You know, I *sdhhv* think that Iran will develop *nucula* weapons. Journalist: So, you think that Iran will develop *nucula* weapons? Interviewee: Absolutely!

### No more wallowing

How has it come to this? It might be forgivable for plumbers, taxi drivers or even Presidents of the United States to wallow in limited and inaccurate vocabulary, but to a journalist, words are the tools of the trade. Journalists should have the same relationship with words that plumbers have with Stillson wrenches, taxi drivers with their cars, and Presidents of the United States with, say, the 101st Airborne Division.

There are perhaps worse sins that science journalists could make, namely getting the science bits wrong. But the way they communicate these facts is also of eminent importance. Language, or, at least, language with a coherent and consistent syntactical structure, is our only means of expressing our intentions, our feelings, our dreams — and the truth behind a good story.

I should like to line up some of the worst offenders and condemn them to death, not only for the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue, but for, you know, what at the end of the day amounts to, *sdhhv* well, speaking for myself personally, I mean, a crime against humanity. Yeah. Absolutely.

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