



Sue de Groot

THE PEDANT CLASS

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Doxy obambulates with bravo

THIS month marks the 20th anniversary of Wordsmith.org, an online service for word lovers run by a man with the marvellously mouth-filling name of Anu Garg. From Monday to Friday, Garg e-mails his subscribers “A Word A Day”. Weekends do not count as Days — even pedants must rest — but by my reckoning that means I have received more than a thousand words since signing up four years ago.

I keep these in a special folder and look at them sometimes. It feels like flipping through a wardrobe full of regal clothes you may wear one day, when the proper occasion arises.

Wednesday’s word was “desuetude”, which sounds like a slimming programme but isn’t. It is a noun describing a state of disuse. If you neglect your poor words, leave them in the wardrobe and never look at them or polish them, they may develop a feeling of desuetude.

It is astonishing how, for two decades, Garg has never failed to make words magical, whether he is digging up unusual ones that have fallen into desuetude or arranging less recondite ones into themes and families. Four years ago, one of the first words he taught me was “usufruct”, the right to enjoy another’s property without destroying it. Words belong to all of us, of course, but if I give you usufruct I trust you not to do anything ugly to it.

Three years ago, in the week starting March 19, Garg’s theme was words with disparate meanings. The first was “doxy”. In one incarnation, a doxy is a woman of loose morals. Gangsters in yellow-jacketed crime novels would sometimes refer to their mistresses as

doxies, floozies or molls.

Linguists (and the gangsters’ wives) are not sure where this doxy came from, but there is a theory that she arose from the old Dutch word for doll, *docke*.

The second kind of doxy means opinion or doctrine. It is a shortening of words such as orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and is used mostly to describe theological and other strict codes of conduct. In other words, pretty much the opposite of what the first doxy does.

Doxy was followed by enceinte (pregnant or fortified), bravo (applause or a villain), cant (hypocrisy or to tilt), and pug (which has too many meanings to list here). In his introduction to these words, Garg quoted Humpty Dumpty from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*: “When I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra.”

A Word A Day is a free service provided by a generous soul who enjoys sharing what he digs up in the rich

mines of language. Some of my other favourites include “obambulate”, which means “to walk about”. It was coined long before the current US president was born and appears in Samuel Johnson’s first English dictionary, but as Garg pointed out, it sounds like it was made to describe Obama during an election campaign. More recently we had “polyphiloprogenitive” (having many children), which could be applied to our own leader.

If I were to choose five words or phrases that should be brushed off and used more frequently, I’d start with “hello”, “thank you”, “sorry” and “go ahead, I’m in no hurry.”

The fifth is “platypus”. Instead of yelling insults and abuse, this is a mild, inoffensive word that can be used to express frustration with, say, bad driving.

There is a chance, however, that the driver being called a platypus might misinterpret it. Perhaps it’s best to stick to “Go ahead, I’m in no hurry.”

