

Speaking of Language

By William E. Lasher

THROW-AWAY WORDS

Writer Wallace Stegner has observed that a community's garbage dump is a good place to learn something about its life and culture. What we choose to throw away says a lot about our values.

In language we choose to throw away some very important words, usually words that are taboo or words that are understood from the context. If you listen carefully to Al Schottelkotte's News you will notice an important word missing from his reports—the word “dollars.” You may hear “The high bid on the construction project was five million,” or “The judge set bail at fifty thousand.” When you become aware of it, the absence of “dollars” becomes rather humorous, and you wait to see when it will be used. Very low figures, such as \$120, will usually be read with “dollars,” but otherwise the pattern is consistent.

What would lead someone to throw away the word “dollars”? My first thought was that it's a time-saving device on a show where time is crucial. Even so, the fact that one of our newscasters can throw away the word must mean that money is a fairly constant context for much of what he says and much of what we expect to hear. Perhaps that means Cincinnatians are more dollar conscious than people in other areas. But you must realize that all of us often answer a question about money with something like “One-sixty.” We assume everyone knows we're talking about dollars, and we don't bother to specify whether we mean \$1.60, or \$160, or \$160,000. It's usually clear from the context which amount is intended, and we throw away the rest of the words as redundant information.

Letters to the Editor are often a source of thrown-away words. Letters that begin “Some may feel that” or “I know many who” have thrown away the referent of “some” or “many”: is it “many men” or “many beans”? The context usually helps, but the reader's impression is that some fuzzy thinking is

going on here. We would like to know whom these words refer to.

Some words have been thrown away so often, or replaced so regularly by euphemisms, that they have become like fossils in the language. Death and taxes provide some good examples. No one says, “Your father died last week, didn't he?” The polite forms are “passed away,” “passed on,” or just “passed.” More often, nothing is said directly about the death: “I'm sorry—I just heard.”

Taxes are a constant source of euphemism in our language—I only recently discovered that my “Social Security contributions” were actually taxes. The President has taken to discussions of “revenue enhancements,” meaning new taxes to take up the slack when the old ones are reduced.

Politicians, experts in the field of euphemism, also have a highly developed sense of words to be thrown away—words like “taxes,” of course, and “depression,” and “war,” remembering that our last official war ended in 1945.

Unlike baseball managers, Cabinet officials are never fired—they resign. And the Watergate investigation uncovered another interesting word for the garbage heap: “lying.” Although there were many anguished discussions of “perjury” among the accused, there was no discussion of lying. Only perjury will get you a term in prison.

There are, I suppose, other words that are thrown on our linguistic garbage dump from time to time. Some are words that have lost their usefulness, like “dray” or “adze,” and are not likely to be reclaimed by the ragpickers. Others are painful but sometimes necessary, like “wrong” or “bad.” And a few are not so much painful as just difficult to say, words that we would rather explain than utter, words like “yes” and “no.”

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