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French is struggling to keep pace with new technology since all translations of English words have to be approved by the General Commission of Terminology and Neology. It took 18 months to come up with a workable translation for ‘cloud computing’.

Five cash machines in east London are to offer Cockney as a language option with phrases like ‘please enter your Huckleberry Finn’ (pin) and options including ‘sausage and mash’ (cash) with or without a receipt. The experiment will last for 3 months.

In an attempt to marginalise minority languages, Slovakia has passed a law which makes it illegal to use ‘incorrect’ Slovak within Slovakia. The punishment is harsh with fines as high as 5,000 euros (£4,315).

French passengers on an Irish flight to Dublin were startled when a routine announcement was mistranslated as a warning the plane was about to ditch. Despite the conspicuous calm of the English speakers on the flight the French passengers reacted with some alarm.



O’er the wine dark sea

Clichés are just worn out phrases peddled by tired hacks. (It’s an abiding writer’s joke that you can’t write about cliché without using them – even the sign on the Editor’s desk reads ‘Avoid clichés, like the plague’.) They are, in Martin Amis’ words, ‘herd writing’. But is it necessarily so? Clichés are also a kind of cultural short-hand for received ideas and long-standing truths. If they are ‘old and tired’, well all language is ‘old’ and aren’t they ‘tired’ because they’ve been found so useful so often. And don’t we love them really? If not in writing then at least in speech we do. The way they inflate us with instant articulacy, bridging gaps in conversation like punctuation marks. Not so much adding meaning as easing the flow.

The English language, we boast, has more words than any other. Experts more or less agree we have around a million words to play with. Not that we play much. For all our wealth of words we misers live a life time on less than 20,000.

Everyday speech uses even fewer – less than 3,000 words. It is endlessly repetitive, endlessly shuffling old bits into new shapes and ruthlessly discarding any that don’t fit. New material is sucked in and spun around for a while but redundancies don’t last. When did you last hear the term ‘information superhighway’ for instance? It arrived, spawned a few derivatives: ‘superhypeway’, ‘infobahn’, etc, and was gone too fast to ever ‘make the grade’ as ‘tired cliché’.

Not like Homer’s ‘wine dark sea’. If any phrase should be described as ‘tired’ it’s that one. Homer barely mentions the sea without using it – and his magnus opus was a sea epic! By the time he finished you’d imagine the wine dark sea would have dried up but, 3,000 years later it’s still here. It’s the title of at least 20 books and a rock symphony. Tired phrase? It’s completely knackered but no less popular for that.

The venerable phrase ‘band of brothers’ is equally tenacious. Coined, like so many other popular sayings, by Shakespeare, in his war epic, Henry V, it’s been used by Swiss rebels, in Schiller’s William Tell, by veterans on both sides of the American civil war, by John Kerry about his compatriots in Vietnam and by Stephen Ambrose about members of 101st Airborne’s Easy company. Cliché or no, it has become the essential badge of martial fraternity.

Any phrase that sticks around long enough to become cliché must have found some real resonance in the public imagination.

"It is a cliché that most clichés are true but then like most clichés, that cliché is untrue." Stephen Fry

The word cliché itself comes from the die used in an eponymous French copying process. The die was used again and again until it wore out. A die was a valuable thing. In the same way, literary references were valued. Students copied the writing style of others as an essential part of their education regurgitating classical thoughts as cliché along the way.

When poets plucked fruit from other writers trees they weren’t being lazy. They swiped from their forebears to prove their literary heritage and from their peers as a nod of respect. Thomas Gray, the English poet, was delighted when people recognised his references – they understood his art.

By the 1880s, Gray and his kind were falling out of favour, their works were derided by one critic as full of ‘previously manufactured material.’ The cult of the individual grew as society began to value the original and the unique above the universal. We began to think of clichés as false coin, empty gestures. It’s a view summed up by Martin Amis “Whenever you write ‘The heat was stifling’ or ‘She rummaged in her handbag’” he says, in *The War Against Cliche*, “you are trafficking in mouldering novelties... Dead words.”

"The first man to compare the cheeks of a young woman to a rose was a poet; the first to repeat it was an idiot." Salvador Dali

Literature is art. And while artists struggle to find their own unique voice, journalists hardly strive for originality at all. In serious contexts, TV interviews or newspaper reports, stock phrases jar on the ear like scratches on a record. At some point they stopped meaning anything, like when you repeat a word over and over till it sounds like nonsense. For instance, why are politicians always ‘shocked and saddened’ by tragedy? Never just ‘shocked’, never just ‘saddened’ and certainly never ‘dismayed’ or ‘horrificed’.

People never get ‘hurt’, they ‘sustain injury’ and emergency services always ‘rush to the scene’. Who in real life ever uses the phrase ‘In the wake of...’? What are the ‘legal reasons’ an offender can’t be named? And who ever believes anyone who starts their question with ‘With all due respect’?

A recent study found that British papers are riddled with clichés, some of them blindingly inane. Researcher, Factiva, found that ‘at the end of the day’, that favourite with Big Brother inmates, scored 3,347 uses in just 6 months. ‘in the red’ and ‘in the black’ came second and third before ‘level playing field’, ‘time and again’ and ‘wealth of experience’.

Media clichés are a particularly insidious intrusion. Nowadays the most likely source of a new cliché is a television writer or presenter. All their ‘thinking outside of boxes’, ‘credit crunching’, and ‘tipping points’. The colonisation by media manufactured language happens virtually overnight.

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O'er the wine dark sea

Researcher, Prorev, analysed the top clichés on Google over a three-month period. Their top twenty are frighteningly familiar...

Real time	359 m.
Prior to	341 m.
In terms of	333 m.
Next generation	224 m.
Best practice	191 m.
State of the art	168 m.
In accordance with	159 m.
All new	110 m.
World class	110 m.
Cutting edge	95 m.
Check it out	90 m.
Support services	87 m.
Sustainable development	80 m.
Mission statement	72 m.
No problem	67 m.
Bottom line	67 m.
On the ground	48 m.
Civil society	47 m.
Period of time	47 m.
Strategic planning	37 m.

And that is really the point. For poets, journalists and TV presenters clichés are anathema. Space filled with nothings when we specifically contract them for somethings. It's a breach, it's a cheat. But, when we use clichés in conversation the rules are different. If you couldn't tell someone you loved them because it's cliché, how would that be? How would we say that?

And then what about all the other minor clichés we use everyday. Also little nothings but somehow enough for the moment. 'My head is swimming', 'Oxford Street was a Nightmare!', 'It's to die for'. We all know what we mean really and it rarely warrants closer inspection. It may be lazy – without introspection or observation – but we don't reject clichés, because they work for us.

Clichés allow us to speak more freely and be heard more easily. They're tools, well worn for being well used. We don't expect a carpenter to throw away a chisel for being too sharp. We expect surgeons to use scalpels, not some fresh, more interesting new way of cutting us open.

Clichés do have invention at their core even though it isn't our own invention. Someone, somewhere was the first person ever to say 'No way Jose!'. Someone, somewhere first referred to the 'generation gap' and to 'baby boomers', and to 'hippies' and 'yuppies', and 'yuppies' and 'muppets' and coined that most heartening cliché of all, 'A pint of the usual please'.

The right phrase at the right time can propagate like a virus until the cliché becomes the very thing itself.

Most new sayings date quickly too. They descend from fresh minty cool, to passé, to cliché until eventually they almost disappear as phrases altogether. They become more like conversational nervous tics as they infiltrate a peculiar meaninglessness into speech betraying all pretence at an education. It is the last ditch beyond which we must not go.

However hard pressed we are to speak before we have anything to say, we must never, ever start a sentence with 'Let's face it!', or 'The fact is', or 'Basically', or 'Actually', or 'To be fair', or 'To be honest'. Oh! And we should never end a sentence with 'You know what I mean?'.

"The reason that clichés become clichés is that they are the hammers and screwdrivers in the toolbox of communication."

Terry Pratchett

Further reading
A Defence of Clichés
Nicholas Bagnall
Constable 1985

The War Against Cliché:
Essays And Reviews, 1971-2000
Martin Amis
Miramax Books 2001

There are only seven stories

Have you noticed how incompetent the master criminals in Bond movies are? "Ah, Mr. Bond, I've been expecting you. Let me reveal my entire evil plan and then put you in a death machine that doesn't work." So, what can you expect when Hollywood churns out around 400 movies a year and there are, apparently, only 7 stories to tell?

1. Overcoming the monster
Defeating the force which threatens. Star Wars, James Bond, Godzilla, etc.
2. The quest
A group setoff in search of something and then they find it. Watership Down, Willow.
3. Journey and return
The hero leaves home for somewhere else and then comes back perhaps changed for the better. Wizard of Oz, Gulliver's Travels.
4. Comedy
A misunderstanding keeps people apart, until it doesn't. Bridget Jones Diary
5. Tragedy
Someone is drawn by base desires and becomes trapped by consequences until they die. Hamlet, Star Wars.
6. Rebirth
The hero is utterly oppressed until miraculously they are freed. Snow White, Count of Monte Christo.
7. Rags to riches
As the name suggests. Brewster's Millions

Dignify your clichés with a little of the classics

We're used to hearing classical references but not necessarily always absolutely sure where they come from. Problem solved!

Stentorian roar

Stentor was a herald of the Greek forces during the Trojan War and notable for his loud voice "...as powerful as a hundred voices of other men". He died after losing a shouting contest.

A Cassandra

The daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. She was given the gift of prophesy by Apollo but cursed that no-one would ever believe her predictions.

Of Saturnine character

A grave, phlegmatic disposition, dull and heavy. Astrologers affirm that such a disposition is indicative of those born under the influence of the leaden planet Saturn.

An Hermetic seal

Meaning completely sealed away outside interference. From Hermes Trismegistus, the Greek name of the Egyptian god Thoth, who apparently invented a way of making an airtight seal in a glass tube using a secret seal.

A Stoic

An adherent of the school of philosophy founded by Zeno, who taught that people should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submit without complaint to unavoidable necessity.

A Fabian

One who achieves victory by irregular tactics rather than through a decisive contest of strength as in the manner of Fabius Maximus, Pope from 236 to 250.

A Pyrrhic victory

A costly victory, after Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, who defeated Roman army but with huge losses on his own side.

As rich as Croesus

King of Lydia from 560BC until his defeat by the Persians around 547BC. Croesus was renowned for his stupendous wealth and his defeat was a profound crisis marked in the calendar of the ancient world like Guy Fawkes is on ours.

A Tantalising prospect

From Tantalus, the son of Zeus and Pluto and a very badly behaved god indeed. Castigated for cannibalism, human sacrifice and infanticide Tantalus was doomed to see the object of his desire, but always just beyond his reach.

Halcyon days

Originates from the Greek myth of Alcyone, daughter of Aeolus. Alcyone offended the gods when she settled back into a life of comfort a little too much. They drowned her husband and drove her to drown herself. It's still used to mean a golden time of peace and prosperity.

Chimaera

A monstrous fire-breathing creature of Lycia in Asia Minor, with the body of a lioness a tail with a snake's head and the head of a goat in the middle of it's back. The term chimaera or chimera has come to mean an impossible dream.

Morpheus

The god of dreams. According to the Roman poet Ovid - he was the son of Hypnos, the god of Sleep.

Thespian

After Thespis of Icaria in the 6th century BC who, according to Aristotle, was the first person ever to appear on stage playing a character other than himself. Generally regarded as the father of drama.

To be Protean

Proteus whom Homer calls the "Old Man of the Sea" is the son of Poseidon. He had the gift of prophesy but would alter his shape in order to escape from questions. The adjective, 'protean' means versatile, capable of assuming many forms.

Sounds like a cliché

While I was writing this piece I came across a site that celebrates enduring soundtrack clichés. Top of the list is the Wilhelm Scream. First used in 1951 for the film Distant Drums, it's got quite a filmography, for a scream.

The Charge at Feather River	1953
Them	1954
Star Wars. A New Hope	1977
The Empire Strikes Back	1980
Raiders of the Lost Ark	1981
Return of the Jedi	1983
Indiana Jones, the Temple of Doom	1984
Howard the Duck	1986
Willow	1988
Indiana Jones, the Last Crusade	1989
Beauty and the Beast	1991
The Trenches of Hell	1992
Batman Returns	1992
Reservoir Dogs	1992
Aladdin	1992
The Phantom Train of Doom	1993
Daredevils of the Desert	1993
Attack of the Hawkmen	1995
A Goofy Movie	1995
Toy Story	1995
Return of the Jedi	1997
Hercules	1997
Small Soldiers	1998
Lethal Weapon 4	1998
The Phantom Menace	1999

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