

"Language Is Fun"

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The answer is, aluminum is right for an American, aluminium is right for us.

Then you come on a word that you know, but it doesn't seem the same as it does with us. You have to be very careful in America asking for *pies* or *biscuits*—you might get a surprise; as there is not the slightest doubt that the American soldiers who are with us now are getting a few surprises themselves at the things we give them when they use familiar words like those.

"Billion" And "Bushfire"

There is another word that means to an American not at all what it means to us: the word billion.

A billion with us is a million millions, but in America it is only a thousand millions. (Someone has said that this



"Those white marks are blazes"

is the only example of a thing that is bigger in England than it is in America!)

I think the greatest surprise I received in turning over the pages of the dictionary was when I came on the word bushfire. I thought, here at least is a word I know all about, but I didn't. Bushfire turned out to be an old American word—perhaps it isn't used much now.

Americans speak of forest fires when they mean what we mean by bushfires. But in the old days of fighting Indians, the soldiers often had to take cover in scrub and thickets and snipe from there, and that is what bushfire meant.

"The Indians", we read, "were beaten back by the bushfire of Lieutenant Stark and his party."

Slang Means Life

The English of America abounds in life, it is one of the most vigorous languages that has ever existed. We argue a lot about slang; but slang is one of the best indications of the liveliness that is in a language—it is a kind of barometer, telling us how much zest a language possesses.

I was reading an article the other day, in a fairly popular American magazine; but it was a serious article—all about that machine called a lie-detector.

The writer's colloquialisms were extremely effective. He says the law courts would have approved the machine long ago if it could have "delivered"; he says, find out how you stand legally before you allow yourself to be subjected to this

sort of test — "don't let ignorance put you on the spot"; if you do certain things, he says, the experts are "sunk"; relax, and it's a "push-over" for you.

Those words—push-over, sunk, on the spot, deliver—all call up pictures to our minds, you will notice again. And you will notice that many American colloquialisms have to do with business or industry or machinery, for these are matters that come very much into American experience, as indeed into the experience of all of us.

So President Roosevelt will speak of the United States as being "geared" to the war-effort; geared is a good word, because we all know what gears are and do.

A Word About Hamlet

You can find similarly expressive colloquialisms in very serious American writing. I was amused, a little while ago, in reading an article in a very learned periodical by an American scholar, on Hamlet.

Perhaps you remember the opening situation in Hamlet. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is worried; his father has died and his uncle has succeeded to the throne; but Hamlet suspects foul play; and presently the ghost of his father returns to tell him that he was, in fact, murdered by his brother, Hamlet's uncle, and yet Hamlet doesn't know quite whether to believe the ghost or not—the ghost may be a devil in disguise. So he hesitates to take action on the ghost's—now what word would an English scholar have used next?

On the ghost's recommendation? No, that would not be very good—on the ghost's information, declaration? They are not very satisfactory words.

But this American scholar didn't hesitate; he had a word of his own up his sleeve that was exactly what he wanted—so he wrote: "Hamlet would not take action on the ghost's say-so!"

What, then, can we learn from American English? What does it show us?

I would say, two things especially. It shows us that language belongs to the people—not to grammarians, not to



"Hamlet would not take action"

makers of dictionaries. Dictionaries and grammars are very important; but they come after; language is the people's, to do what they like with.

And, secondly, I think American English undoubtedly shows us that language is fun.

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