

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Nologisms

Before revealing what *Nologisms* are, I must first explain neologisms. A neologism is a newly coined word or phrase that has recently entered the language. It may be in the process of becoming, but has not yet been accepted into, mainstream use. The word comes from the Greek (*néō*, meaning "new", and *lógos*, meaning "utterance or speech"). That said, there are neologisms that have been around so long that they are very much everyday words today.

Very often, neologisms are directly attributable to a specific writer, speaker, public person or event. They can be derived from characters in works of literature, such as *scrooge*, *pollyanna* and *quixotic*. The word *goon* in the sense of "hired thug" probably came from *Alice the Goon*, a slow-witted, muscular Amazonian bodyguard in the *Thimble Theater* comic strip (starring Popeye) by E. C. Segar (1894 - 1938). Sometimes the neologism comes from the book's title itself, such as Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, or perhaps just a word appearing in a book – like *nymphet* in Nabokov's *Lolita*.

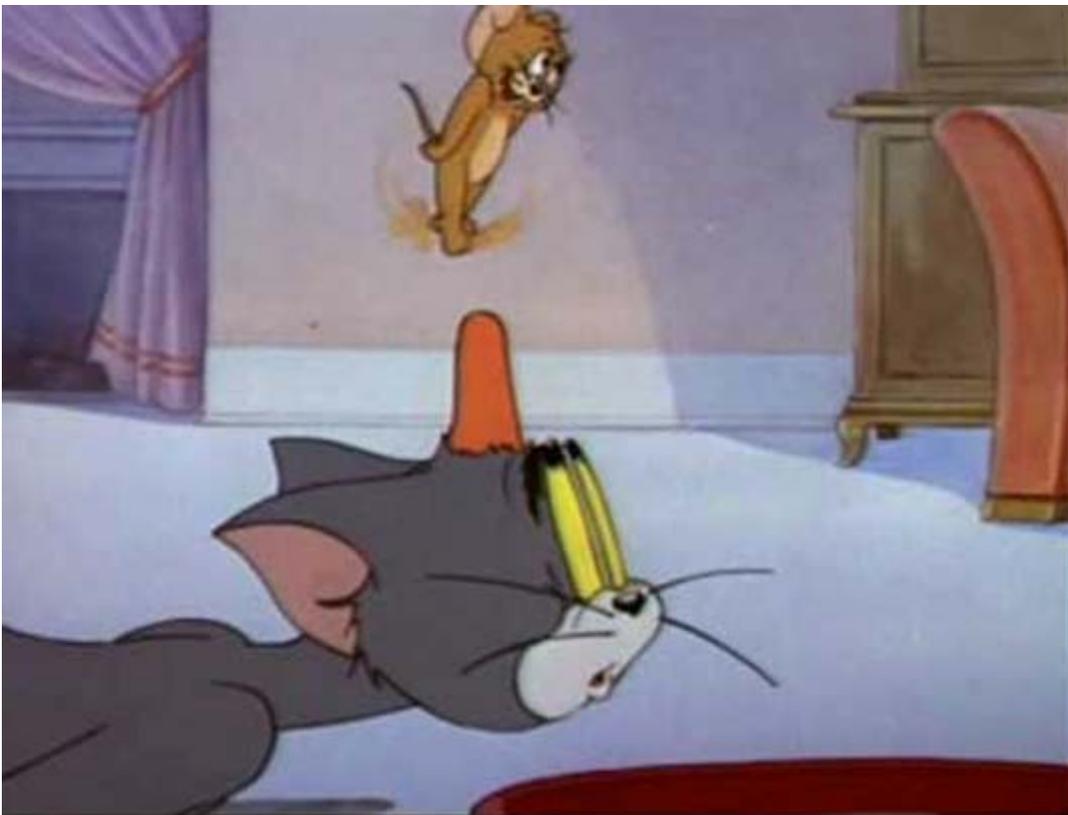
In 2003, the *Oxford English Dictionary* added *muggle* to its list, referring to a person who is lacking a skill. From J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series, a *muggle* is somewhat perjorative term for one who was not born into the magical world and therefore lacks any kind of magical acumen. Rowling said she created this neologism from "mug", an English term for one who is easily fooled, and added the last three letters to make it sound more "cuddly". What she failed to realize was that the word *muggle* dates back to 1920s New Orleans where it was slang for marijuana. A 1931 *TIME* magazine article defined it as "a variety of hemp weed long common in Mexico".

Sometimes neologisms come from science, such as *X-ray* and *black hole*, or science fiction (like *warp speed* and *cyberspace*). Some scientific words are acronyms, like *radar* (1941) from Radio Detection And Ranging and *laser* (1960) from Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. *Star Wars* (taken from the title of the popular 1977 film) was a derisive neologism used by the mainstream media for Reagan's 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Since personal

computers and the internet, we now have *blog* (a contraction of the words web and log), *google*, *photoshop* and *social network* (to name but a few).

A "semantic extension" is a type of neologism that is a new usage of an existing word, such as *green* - chosen the most annoying neologism of 2008 (other irritations that year were: *carbon footprint*, *staycation* and *game-changer*).

There are New Orleans words that have started out as neologisms and are today full-fledged entries in the dictionary, such as *lagniappe* (for that something extra given as a bonus or extra gift) and *picayune* (for something petty or of little value). Still, there are special meanings to words in the Crescent City that never made it out of metropolitan area. Some are slang, like *razoo*, or a different interpretation of a perfectly good English word, like *hickey*. Locally, the word *razoo* is used in the game of marbles and - in general New Orleans usage - it means to get something (or make off with it) before somebody else does. *Hickey* in the rest of the country means a bruised love bite (usually on the neck), but in New Orleans it's a "bump on the head".



Jerry ecstatic over Tom's enormous hickey

It is well-known that for centuries the French have been fighting anglicisms, i.e., English neologisms entering the French Language. This is especially amusing in that the term *neologism* (first appearing in English in 1772) was borrowed from French *néologisme* in 1734.

They fought *le Big Mac* and other intrusions, but words like *tweets* and *Lol* ("laughing out loud" in internet speak) have been recently added to some French dictionaries. Sometimes the French language cops fail miserably in trying to change the English to French, as in "*les air bags*" to "*les sacs gonflables*". Which would you choose?

Some neologisms are *portmanteau* words, a combination of two (or more) words formed into one new word. They can be compound words like *keyboard* or two words fusing together to make one, such as smoke and fog into *smog*. The French can't be too upset that the word comes from the English *portmanteau* (a double-compartmented piece of luggage), itself derived from the French *porter* (to carry) and *manteau* (coat). A famous *portmanteau* word is *gerrymandering*, creating a politically convoluted and contrived voting district (very much done today). It combines the name of Massachusetts Governor Elbridge *Gerry* (1744 – 1814), mastermind of such a redistricting scheme, with a *salamander* (which the new district resembled).



The original Gerrymander

April 25, 2013, Emily Temple of "flavorwire" posted the eight "most irritating neologisms" and the stories behind them. They were: *metrosexual*, *blurb*, *fashionista*, *meme*, *vajayjay* (you know what happens when Oprah decides to get behind something), *soccer mom*, *slaktavism* and *bootylicious*.

Some neologisms come into the language by way of a mistranslation. A 1530 translation of the Bible by William Tyndale misinterpreted the name "Azazel" to be "ez ozel", meaning literally "goat that departs". This mutated to "escape goat" and then to the modern "scapegoat". The late New Orleans City Councilmember Dorothy Mae Taylor earned a spot in the book "The 776 Even Stupider Things Ever Said" for using the antiquated version of the term. Reacting to news that certain Mardi Gras krewes would stop parading because of her ordinance, she said, "They're just using (the ordinance) as an escape goat."



Krewe of Don't Do

Azazel, from Colin de Plancy's Dictionnaire Infernal (Paris, 1825)

Sadly for Tyndale, he wrote something else in 1530: *The Practyse of Prelates*, opposing Henry VIII's divorce on the grounds that it went against Scripture. Needless to say, he was executed by strangulation and burned at the stake. His dying request was that Henry's eyes would be opened. Two years later, the King authorized *The Great Bible* for the Church of England (largely Tyndale's own work). When the *King James Version* came out in 1611, it is estimated that 83% of the New Testament and 76% of the Old Testament is Tyndale's.

And it must be mentioned that some newly coined words can't help but bring a laugh. George W. Bush was not actually the one who coined *stratergy*. That was done for him on Saturday Night Live. But he did create some great ones by himself, such as "They *misunderestimated* me."

The *Washington Post* has been having fun with humorous neologisms since 1993, when their Style Invitational began offering weekly humor/wordplay contests, which they call "an irreverent mix of highbrow and lowbrow - haughty and potty - in genres ranging from

neologisms to cartoon captions to elaborate song parodies." A new contest appears every Friday, and many of the clever selections have appeared in recurring *e-mails* (another neologism: it also first appeared in 1993).

Chosen winners are either new and witty interpretations of existing words, or newly fashioned words created by changing or dropping just one letter.

Examples:

KINSANE: What your family's relatives are.

DENSA: A club whose secret password is "It's me."

INTAXICATION: Euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

REINTARNATION: Coming back in another life as a hillbilly.

BALDERDASH: A rapidly receding hairline.

POKEMON: A Rastafarian proctologist.

HIPATITIS: Terminal coolness.

And one with a New Orleans pedigree:

ESPLANADE: To attempt an explanation while drunk.

So, without further ado, I propose more witty creations like "*ESPLANADE*" above: New Orleans flavored, newly minted words or phrases I have named *Nolagisms*. A few examples follow below:

DOMINOTRIX: A woman in black leather who whips you and says, "Ain't That A Shame".

ÉTOUFFÉ: Julius Caesar's last words if Faye had betrayed him instead of Brutus.

TIPITINA: A very small gratuity.

NON-NECTARIAN: Non-discriminatory in choosing one's sno-ball flavor.

TCHEFUNCT-UP: Totally wasted on the North Shore.

CRUDITÉ: Yankee pronunciation of Krewe d'Etat.

AMBER-DEXTEROUS: Being able to hold an Abita brew mug with either hand.

IRMATOLOGY: When one itches to hear New Orleans' Soul Queen.

BARQ-A-LOUNGER: One who drinks root beer while reclining in his easy chair.

MOGUSBORD: A buffet that will horrify and shock you.

CHOPSLEY: The garnish around that buffet.

BREEZILY: How the Saint's win each game.

HUBIGQUITOUS: Great pies are now just about everywhere.

PELICAN BRIEF: Tightly-whities for a big-billed bird or a New Orleans basketball player.

GENITAL HERMES: Seems like I belonged to that Carnival krewe since birth.

TREMÉNDOUS: One of New Orleans' oldest faubourgs has hit the big time.

THROWBACKS: Inferior Mardi Gras beads re-hurled toward a float.

CHICORY: Where to find beautiful New Orleans Ladies.

A-MUSE BOUCHE: Feeling in one's mouth trying to pronounce Terpsichore or Euterpe.

Those are mine. Now, I'd love to hear from you. What *Nolagisms* can you dream up? They can be existing words that present a clever New Orleans twist or New Orleans words or phrases with a whole new meaning. Remember, you may decide to replace, drop or add a letter to an existing word or phrase. E-mail me, and I'll print the best ones.

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