

I'm John Sturtevant, and this is Say What?! A weekly podcast with quick tips to help you communicate clearly at work, at home, and everywhere else you go.

Welcome to Say What?! Episode 16

This week's quick tip is: May I have a word?

In my podcast a couple of weeks ago, I mentioned how students in Baltimore invented the word Yo as a third person singular gender neutral pronoun.

To me, it's a useful, even necessary word. English has needed it for centuries.

Many other languages have that sort of pronoun – Mandarin Chinese, Persian, Mohawk, Russian. And 58 other languages.

So why not English?

Often when I mention that to someone, he or she...er...I mean Yo will chuckle and say “but it's just a made up word some kids invented.”

Yes, I'll reply. And every other word in English was also invented by someone.

At various times throughout history, the words we use every day did not exist. And someone invented each one of them, or adapted a word, for English.

It may have been created from scratch like serendipity which was coined by Horace Walpole in 1754. In fact, Shakespeare invented nearly two thousand words that are still commonly used today.

Some words were borrowed from another language like lemon, which comes from Arabic, or pajama from Hindi.

And some words change their meaning over time. Like the word nice. It came from Latin and meant an ignorant or foolish person.

Even now, there are many English words we commonly use, or rather misuse – that don't mean what most of us think they do.

Like infamous. It means famous for a negative reason, not very famous. Or inflammable. It means something that can burn, not that can't burn.

There are many other examples of how we invent, borrow, adapt, or misuse words. I'll post a few links on the podcast page on my website.

And people still invent new words every day.

My kids are in their 20s. When I listen to their conversations, I hear wonderful new words, phrases, and nonverbal vocalizations I've never heard before.

New words come from all kinds of sources – new music, your brother's tweet, a friend's finsta, or just your own imagination.

In fact, I've invented a few word too. Yawnmoaner - A person who makes a loud sound when yawning, as I do.

Bagwallers – Those people who stand up close to the airport luggage carousel waiting for their bag, and create a human wall so I can't get through to reach my own suitcase.

Breakfix - To break something so it will work better. As in, the coffee maker kept overflowing, because the pot wouldn't line up perfectly

with the drip valve. So I had to breakfix the valve. Now the coffee flows freely!

Also other words fade from use over time. Like icebox, which became refrigerator, and then fridge. When was the last time you put a dime in a payphone? My mother would often say shan't meaning will not or won't. That word isn't part of my vocabulary.

So paying attention to your words, and learning new words, or even inventing your own, can help you communicate clearly and connect with your readers.

There is so much content available to all of us these days, it's easy to develop content shock – when there's more information for us to consume than we have the appetite for. We lose our desire for more.

You can help people remember the content in your emails, your website, your blog – everything you write – by getting people to stop what they're doing and pay attention. If even for only a few minutes.

Using words with purpose to connect your ideas and your reader – sometimes in an unconventional way – will help brighten up your content,

help people remember what you write, and inspire them to want to learn more.

Words flow through our language like a river, and that's a wonderful thing.

I encourage you to wade into that river and watch its rapids and eddies. Gather some language in the palm of your hand and taste its sweet clarity.

Use words with purpose. Words of appreciation for a coworker who's done a good job. Funny words for a friend who needs cheering up. Kind words for the barista who will hand you your fresh coffee tomorrow morning. Confident words when you make your next sales presentation.

Who knows? You might just discover that being more luculent is quite sagacious.

That's Say What?! for this week. Thanks for listening!

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