

Studies of the f-word point to German origins

JANET HOLMES' recent column on the f-word gave rise to many e-mails. It was intriguing to see how much interest readers had in the etymology of the word — there were several assorted assumptions, along with questions. It is certain that the word was in use in verb form before the 16th century, but 1528 was its first recorded use in English, and there are later records of its use in 1568 and 1598.

The word is probably taken from the Dutch *fokken* "to beget children", from Middle High German "to rub", or from German *ficken* "to have sexual intercourse with". There have been many suggestions about the word originating as an acronym (made up of a series of initial letters of words) but these have not been treated with any seriousness in linguistic circles.

Many of the requests we receive at the New Zealand Dictionary Centre are for information on the origins of words. Marion Bradman of Napier asked recently about the meaning and origin of the term "craw thumper". *Craw thumper* is an old term for Roman Catholic, recorded first in the 18th century, and so called because of a worshipper's tendency to beat his or her craw or breast during confession.

The only record of its use in New Zealand is from 1875 in the *West Coast Times* in a satirical musing on the celebration of Christmas: "Ah, here comes Mr Crawthumper of the Good Staggers, whose face receives, like other satellites, a glow of warmth from his nose which lends a charm and lustre to his features truly astonishing — in a staggerer."



Dianne Bardsley

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

The 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* provides the synonyms of "brisket beater" and "breast fleet" for *craw thumper* and, along with these, this work contains many intriguing terms, including "jumblegut lane" (a rough road or track), light troops (lice), and "kittle pitching" (the habit of side-tracking somebody involved in telling a long story). Though short on etymological detail, this little book is worth reading for the amusement it provides.

We also receive e-mails about a perceived "mangling" of the English language. These days we might encounter more typos, errors of expression, and malapropisms than we have before, perhaps because more people are using keyboards, and because electronic communication, in general, requires some truncation or abbreviation. Or is it because blunders receive more published comment than they used to in great-grandma's day?

For decades we have been entertained by absurdities in the *Life in New Zealand* column in the *Listener*. It's one of the first sections to be sought by many readers. Recently we have been treated to: "The American palette was used to heavily wooded chardonnays ...", "Miss Clark also announced a \$446

million funding boost over four years for voluntary services that would otherwise have to be delivered by the Government, such as child abuse" and "... we are woken by the local fire siren.

Often in the summer, the siren goes off twice per night. Each time, I settle our baby from crying, and curse it ..."

We all have our own favourite quotable nonsense. Memorable for me was a sign on a Taranaki bus which read, "No food or fish and chips to be eaten on this coach" and of course we laughed at the "Ears pierced while you wait" notice.

So is there a more serious side to this unintended nonsense? Should we be worried? It's hard not to sit on the linguistic fence when it comes to "correctness". We might follow Lynne Truss and groan and scoff and mourn that the younger generations know nothing about the rules of grammar and pronunciation, and the mangling of our mother tongue.

Such concern about the demise of "English as it should be used" is not new. In 1944 author Cyril Connolly made a figurative observation: "The English language is like a broad river on whose bank a few patient anglers are sitting, while higher up, the stream is being polluted by a string of refuse-barges tipping out their muck." Others of us might simply rejoice in the richness and colour provided by idiosyncratic usage.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz