Yes, Alice, words can indeed be made to mean many things

Dianne Bardsley
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

AMONGST other matters, Lewis Carroll's Alice questioned "whether you can make words mean so many different things". Some words are certainly chameleon-like in their various lives.

Columnist Karl du Fresne recently brought my attention to the variously spelled term "slinter", a word used commonly in 19th-century New Zealand in a range of specific contexts.

These included courtrooms and the sports of boxing, wrestling, racing, rowing and rugby.

In general, a slinter is a fraud or trick. In sports, it is specifically a term for match-fixing. It is now used most commonly in the taxi industry, which is where du Fresne encountered it, when it refers to a non-existent fare, that is, when a taxi is ordered to an address but no-one is there.

At the Dictionary Centre, our first citation of the word's use is from 1864, when the well-known songster Thatcher claimed: "Twas a 'shlinter' for the tenant one morning departed, Without paying his rent." Incidentally, this citation also appeared in the *Australian National Dictionary*, without providing the New Zealand provenance, which is in itself a bit of a slinter.

The term was not recorded in Australian use until 1919, when it was spelled both schlenter and slanter. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the form is schlenter, and the first citation for it is the one we have from Thatcher!

Although a similar term was later used in South African mining for false gemstones, it appears that as both a noun and an adjective it was first known and recorded here in New Zealand.

Our most recent 21st-century citation is from columnist Colin James in a comment about Michael Cullen's 2004 Budget tax adjustments for working families: "Electorally, however, it is a nifty slinter, since for those who get the churned tax back it will be an offset to the 33c."

Like so many terms, it finds a use in the political domain.

In early New Zealand land settlement, a host of terms to do with preventing one's neighbours from taking up land that one wanted for oneself included dummying, grid-ironing, jobbing, spoiling, spotting, and stuffing. Specific uses of words for slinterish practices, Alice.

A very modern form of slinter was pointed out to me by reader Colin Wilson in the use of the term "eminent domain" in the United States.

It is the practice whereby property developers persuade the state to buy property from unwilling sellers through what we would call a "compulsory purchase order" and then on-sell it to the developer to make a profit.

ROTUNDA is a term for which the meaning has been extended in New Zealand English. While the word has long been applied to circular buildings in Europe, usually galleries or museums, we applied it to buildings which were known elsewhere as bandstands or even sound shells.

And the New Zealand rotunda was not always round. The first municipal bandstand in Dunedin was a rectangular building that was erected temporarily in the Octagon as the saluting base for the official party during the visit of the Duke of York in 1901.

When it was subsequently moved to the Botanic Garden to become a public bandstand, it was quite quickly and frequently referred to as a rotunda, despite its shape.

In previous columns we discussed the often-fanciful nature of notes on wine-tasting. Here is a domain where words can mean so many things, and yet nothing. The exuberance with which some wines are described can test credibility.

"The resulting wine is not an over the top cloying sticky monster but a melting pot of honey, apricot, grapefruit marmalade beautifully presented by its elegant structure." (Sounds sticky to me.) Now wines are gendered – they can exhibit masculine tannins. Vintners now "shepherd" their fruit into the bottle. That makes it "pushy in its exuberance".

Bob Campbell applies the term "assertive" to a sauvignon blanc: "A concentrated mix of green capsicum, passionfruit, tomato leaf, cut grass and fresh asparagus. It is complex, assertive, grainy textured wine in a strongly varietal style." A particular chianti has "rich, almost decadent aromas of crushed berry, meat and mole".

Meat and mole? Images of the effluent of abattoirs or Roman baths are evoked.

Alice, it seems that you can definitely make words mean so many different things.

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