

## THE WEEK IN BOOKS

### The ugliest words; Marilyn Monroe's dog; and Wacko races



Here's an experiment. You're in a spaceship approaching a planet. You've been told there are two races on it, one beautiful and friendly to humans, the other unfriendly, ugly and mean-spirited. You also know that one of these groups is called the Lamonians; the other is called the Grataks. Which is which?

Most people assume that the Lamonians are the nice guys. It's all a matter of sound symbolism. Words with soft sounds such as "l", "m" and "n", and long vowels or diphthongs, reinforced by a gentle polysyllabic rhythm, are interpreted as "nicer" than words with hard sounds such as "g" and "k", short vowels and an abrupt rhythm.

At the Ledbury poetry festival last weekend, poets were asked to say which words they hated most and why. They should have been asked for loves as well as hates, because that's more illuminating. But even the hate-answers are interesting.

There are always two reasons why people love or hate a word. One is the meaning, the other is the sound, and it's difficult to disentangle the two. Concentrating on the sound can best be done when meaning is taken out of the equation, by comparing synonyms. Philip Wells's dislike of "pulchritude" (for "beautiful") is a case in point. It's a word the Grataks might use.

When the Guardian opened up the issue to the internet public, the response was extraordinary - 1,500 posts in a week. However, the reasons for the logophobia varied enormously. Some inveighed against clichés ("solutions"), Americanisms ("math"), Latinate words ("defenestrate"), colloquialisms ("like", when used for, like, quoting), political correctness ("chairperson"), nouns as verbs ("critique"), irregular spellings ("inveigle") and much more. Only a minority actually focused on the phonetics, and when they did, Gratak-sounds ruled.

The vast majority of the hated words were short - one or two syllables - with short vowels and hard or hissing sounds: "crotch", "sac", "fiscal", "gusset", "nappy", "guttled", "rectum", "gash", "pustule". Slightly longer hates were "obligate", "spatula", "privilege" and "masticate". The most interesting suggestions were those where the meaning of the word was pleasant, or at least neutral, but the sound still got on someone's nerves: "kudos", "bap", "boobs", "feisty", "veggie", "kooky", "pasty", "pamphlet", "spouse" and - ironically - "poet".

The forum started off with someone hating "moist". That's an interesting one, because it begins with soft sounds and a diphthong and ends with hissing and hard sounds. I'd expect opinions to be evenly divided there - and indeed, it wasn't long before "moist" had its defenders. "Flange" was another that brought divided opinions.

Did anyone restore the balance, sending in words they liked the sound of? Yes, a few: "miasma", "lilt", "eland", "bland"; and the mouth-watering "oligopoly".

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