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## Webheads, Googlewhackers and Anosmiacs: A desultory survey of selected net-based English language resources.

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It is becoming more and more evident, to expert linguists and novices alike, that the Internet has become a language resource to be reckoned with. Aside from the ever-growing number of scholarly sites devoted to helping students improve their language skills, there is a mindbendingly large number of sites aimed at some of the more offbeat and less rigorously academic aspects of the English language such as slang, non-standard usage, speculative etymology, word games and other such pursuits.

One of my favorite sites of this type is **yaelf.com** (yaelf is an acronym for 'Yet Another English Language FAQ'). Yaelf.com is a veritable plethora of interesting facts about, articles on and links to English Language usage. Here, for example, one can learn about an Internet language game called 'Googlewhacking', which apparently is an invention of some search-obsessed fans of Google.com, the search engine that has an index of over three billion Web pages. The object of Googlewhacking is simple enough. A participant types two words into the Google search line with the hopes of pulling off a single search result. If you see 'Results 1-1 of 1' appear under a Google search — congratulations! You're a winner (and you clearly don't have enough work to do).

Despite the simple rules, Googlewhacking is more difficult than it sounds. Google's massive database updates constantly, thus making the solitary search result more and more elusive. And, of course, if your Googlewhack is subsequently recorded anywhere online it is forever nullified as a Googlewhack since future searches would pull up multiple results, which is one of the maddening aspects of the pastime.

Bewildered? Take *cuneiform meatspace*, a Googlewhack allegedly coined recently by an Internet user. A search performed only weeks after this Googlewhack triggered three search results for *cuneiform meatspace*, thus ending its brief life as a successful whack, or 'uniwhack'. Today, a similar search on *cuneiform meatspace* would yield well over 100 search results. Other uniwhacks worthy of note are *microsoft crenellation*, *orchestrator bamboozling*, *metronome dewpoint* and *plectrum irradiation*.

Online resources are particularly good for investigating English-

language ephemera such as recent coinages or slang. Of course there are more respectable and redoubtable authorities on slang in published form, but it could take years for a new word or phrase to enter the pages of a non-standard dictionary in traditional book form. Take, for example, the speed at which online language sites have provided us with interesting lists of 9/11 coinages. For a starter, it seems that most Americans have settled on the shorthand term '9/11' (pronounced 'nine-eleven' and not 'nine-one-one') for the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Other words/expressions (originally noted by the American Dialect society) were: *weaponize*: adapt anthrax, shoes, etc, for use as a weapon, *ground zero*: site of the collapsed World Trade Center towers, *linguistic profiling*: using language clues to identify a person's ethnicity and other characteristics; and *theoterrorism*: attacks on civilians for a religious purpose. Most of the 9/11 related words one can find in such word lists are mentioned because they are considered common, successful or useful, others, like *Osamaniac*: woman sexually attracted to Osama bin Laden; or *shuicide bomber*: terrorist with bomb in shoes; are generally noted for their creativity and/or comic effect. Yet others are discussed because they are derived from words/phrases whose usage has somehow expanded or changed, as for example if a youngster is so angry they threaten *to go anthrax on you* or if students complain that a notoriously strict teacher is *totally jihad* or if someone feels that your concerns are so trivial and small, they accuse you of being *so September 10<sup>th</sup>*.

Whether or not such coinages will remain as permanent, frequent or even decipherable elements in the English language is a completely different question. Those who remember the fate of the word *chad*, an ever so frequent term used in the hotly contested US presidential election in 2000 (*chad* being the small, perforated bit of paper that is created when one punches a hole in a ballot), know very well how quickly topical phrases like *pregnant chad*, *dimpled chad* or *hanging chad* can fade into oblivion.

One cannot help but be amazed by the incredible array of specialized slang/jargon dictionaries available on the web, such as 'Buffy Slanguage' (slang derived from or associated with the TV show 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (see <http://www.buffyworld.com/slanguage/>) where one can learn the meaning of expressions like *backseat mothering*: unsolicited advice from non-parent; and *guiltapalooza*: excessive-remorse. There's also 'A Prisoner's Dictionary' which contains prison slang words dealing with matters that are part of prison culture (see <http://home.attbi.com/~prisonwall/words.htm>), such as *chin check*: to hit someone in the jaw to see if he will stand up for himself; or *Buck Rodgers time*: a parole date so far into the future, the inmate cannot imagine release. If you've ever wondered what your hip-hop-and-rap-loving children are trying to say when they use words like *homeboy*, *diss*, *crib*, *fly* and *phat*, you should invest a little time at The Rap Dictionary (<http://www.rapdict.org/>). Take my word, it's *dope*.

Ever worry about the proper response one should offer if some guy wearing a cookie cutter down at the speakeasy jams a roscoe in your button and says, 'Close your yap, bo, or I squirt metal'? Well if you understood the hardboiled slang of detectives like Sam Spade and Mike Hammer (see <http://www.miskatonic.org/slang.html>) you'd be put wise. You don't need to be a *webhead* like me to know that you can send so-called 'smileys' like ;-) or :-P at the end of your e-mail messages, but you might be considered a complete *newbie* if you got @};— (a rose) or 5:-) (an Elvis) and didn't know what it was. The list of online slang/jargon dictionaries is seemingly endless — there's the gay slang dictionary (see <http://www.hurricane.net/~wizard/19.html>), a dictionary for graffiti artists (<http://graffiti.org/index.html>), a list of jargon for coin collectors (<http://malakoff.com/cms.htm>) a Jazz age slang dictionary (<http://home.earthlink.net/~dlarkins/slang-pg.htm>), and there's even a site with jargon for bullfight 'aficionados' ([http://www.mundo-taurino.org/alt\\_word.html](http://www.mundo-taurino.org/alt_word.html)). Ole!

Aside from language activities like Googlehacking and online 'slanguage' dictionaries, there are many sites on the web devoted to answering questions about language and language usage. For example, you surely know that a person who cannot see is blind, a person who cannot hear is deaf, but what is it called when you cannot smell? According to [yaelf.com](http://yaelf.com), someone without a sense of smell suffers from *anosmia* and can therefore be called *anosmiac*. And where in the world does an expression like *the bee's knees* come from? The origin of this phrase seems to be contested, and a cursory survey of the web provides us with several competing explanations. The most entertaining (if not the most believable) to my mind is that the expression was coined in the 1920s by an American cartoonist named Tad Dorgan, who also graced the English language with other goofy superlatives such as *the cat's pajamas* as well as less enduring ones such as *the flea's eyebrows* and the abysmally awful and arcane *the canary's tusks* (whatever that means).

Finally, I would like to pass on some advice from a net language guru at [halfbakery.com](http://halfbakery.com) who reminds us how tiresome and tedious meetings can be when people insist on using ordinary, common (and occasionally useful) metaphors. Things like, *Send it up the flagpole...*, or *Can't see the forest...*, or *Too busy cutting down trees...*, etc, etc, etc. So instead, the web author advises us, at your next meeting, start using 'surreal' metaphors. The idea is to come up with a phrase that sounds like it really ought to mean something, then move on like everyone should know what you mean. For example, you could say *That's like feeding a creampuff to a zombie* or *You don't want to be caught measuring eagle droppings with toothpicks*. According to [halfbakery.com](http://halfbakery.com), the beauty of phrases like these is that they could have meaning, but the best way to play is to use them completely out of context. For instance, at your next meeting, you and your colleagues are discussing different computer programs, and someone proposes trying some particular

software. At the appropriate moment, you say, *We shouldn't give agriculture lessons to peanuts*. It seems completely profound, but it is meaningless.

Naturally, I cannot vouch for the veracity of alternative English-Language websites like those I have discussed above, and I would urge any potential information-seeker to check their sources and verify the facts before they reiterate any information gleaned from the net. Hopefully, however, I have convinced you of the wealth of information that is available out there for the inquisitive mind. I could, of course, drone on about how interesting, entertaining and useful the web can be as a language resource, but that would be like mailing a giraffe to Central Park, wouldn't it?

Want to know more? Check out the following internet 'metasites' for links to linguistics/ English language websites:

<http://pw1.netcom.com/~rlederer/rllink.htm>  
[http://www.alt-usage-english.org/categorized\\_links.shtml](http://www.alt-usage-english.org/categorized_links.shtml)  
<http://www.catweb.nu/> (click on 'språk & referens')  
<http://www.ilovelanguages.com/>  
<http://babel.uoregon.edu/yamada/guides.html>  
[http://dir.yahoo.com/Social\\_Science/Linguistics\\_and\\_Human\\_Languages](http://dir.yahoo.com/Social_Science/Linguistics_and_Human_Languages)  
<http://dir.altavista.com/search?pg=dir&tp=Library/Humanities/Languages&crd=53831>

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