Language

Learning a Foreign Language

My Previous Thoughts on the Subject

The study of language is often broken down into three subjects: syntax (the study of proper word order); semantics (the study of meaning); and pragmatics (the study of the circumstances in which words and phrases are used). Syntax and semantics are usually considered more important than pragmatics, but I think the reverse is the case: that in language, *everything* is pragmatics.

This idea derives from an idea in William Curtis's, *How to Improve Your Math Grades*, which is accessible on the web site www.occampress.com. Curtis suggests that, regarding the organization of any textbook, we ask ourselves, "What does the organization of this book imply about the way it was intended to be used?" If we ask the same question of a typical grammar book for a natural language, e.g., for English or German, it soon dawns on us that such books — despite their titles and prefaces and publishers' blurbs — are really organized for use by grammarians. (A grammarian and a student of the language are by no means necessarily the same thing.) If we consider the organization of a book as a kind of higher syntax of the language, then Curtis's idea is an example of use (pragmatics) determining syntax. Of course, textbooks are relatively rare occurrences of language use. The question form, "What does one say in circumstances *x*?", and its replies, is a more common example of pragmatics governing syntax. Thus, the common phrase book carried by tourists is an example of a pragmatics-governed book.

But even the best phrase book at present (2004) is a poor example of a truly pragmatics-based book for learning (i.e., using) a foreign language. Such a book — or, in Curtis's terminology, "Environment" — would be organized alphabetically, so that one could find the word or phrase or sentence or group of sentences — let us say, the "syntactic entity" — one needed by looking up:

(a) the circumstances in which the syntactic entity was to be used, e.g., shopping, asking for directions, discussing literature, dealing with machinery, e.g., a car or a washing machine, then,

(b) under those circumstances, looking up the "semantic class" of what one wanted to say. Such classes include: expressing a desire, expressing repugnance, expressing alarm, telling what is wrong with something, expressing greetings, identifying oneself, apologizing, expressing a farewell, etc. (Is there a "minimal set" that covers most needs in most circumstances?) Then,

(c) under the semantic class, looking up the syntactic entity one wishes to translate, e.g., "birthday", "gas-station", "job", "I'm afraid that...", "Can you tell me...?", with ample cross-referencing of synonyms. As far as pronunciation is concerned, already in 1991, small, hand-held computers existed which pronounce, in a specified foreign language, certain words and phrases selected by the user.

As far as semantics is concerned, recall Wittgenstein's famous definition: "For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." — para. 43, *Philosophical Investigations*. In other words, semantics is pragmatics. Marshall McLuhan's study of communications media can be regarded as pragmatics-based, in that his message was not, e.g., "Study and analyze the content of television programs", but rather, "Study and analyze the changes in behavior of individuals, and a society, when television is introduced." To those who argue that the way that a typical dictionary relates words (and phrases) and meanings shows that there is nothing wrong with the current view of language, I will simply point to the crude state of computer translation of natural languages, even at this late date. The difficulty does not lie in the difficulty of storing in the computer, tables of words and meanings, but rather in the difficulty of storing representations of the circumstances in which each word has a meaning.

My Present Thoughts on the Subject

The pragmatics-based book described in the previous sub-section is far too complicated for its purpose. A much better book (or computer program) would simply list commonly-used words, phrases, and sentences alphabetically in the source language (e.g., English), with the translation in the target language (e.g., French) immediately following. (An example of an early draft of a book such as the one proposed here will be found in the chapter of this book titled "Instant French".)

The rule for using the book would simply be: (1) think of what you want to say in the source language; (2) look it up; (3) say it in the target language.

Of course, we also need a second book to go from the target language to the source language, so that we can understand what people say to us. The same principles apply to that book.

There are several possible objections to such books, and I will respond to them now.

Objection 1: There are far too many words, phrases, and sentences in a language — in fact, in principle there are an infinite number! — to put in a book of the type you describe.

Reply to Objection 1: But the goal here is *not* to enable the user of the book to be a polished speaker of the language! The goal is to provide him or her with a means of "getting along" in the language in everyday life. Now anyone who has kept a record of just what words, phrases, and sentences he finds himself wanting to be able to say in the target language, knows that the number is smaller than he might have thought initially — as the typical phrase book for tourists suggests. The rule for creating the book we propose is simply: include the most frequently used words, phrases and sentences. (We note in passing that it would be of both practical and theoretical interest to develop histograms (frequency-of-occurrence diagrams) of words, phrases and sentences: all of those consisting of just one word, all of two words, all of three words, etc., where the words need not be in succession, since in languages such as German, in which the verb usually comes at the end of the sentence, this clearly must be allowed.)

We must emphasize that each book such as we propose will be limited to a given context, and that this will further reduce the potential size of the book. But the context may be quite broad, e.g., traveling in the country in which the target language is spoken, having guests from the country in one's home, working at a specific type of job in the country, etc. We do not constrain the context to be merely, say, dining out, or shopping.

The chapter of this book titled "Instant French" strongly suggests, I think, that less than fifty pages of words and phrases and sentences are sufficient to meet most everyday language needs. Readers who still believe that there are too many words, phrases, and sentences to put into a list, should remember that a typical instruction book in a language contains such a list! The only problem is that the list is not in alphabetical order!

Objection 2: There is no need for such a book. Simply use a tourist phrase book, or the appropriate Berlitz book.

Reply to Objection 2: Neither type of book lists the phrases and sentences in alphabetical order for fast look-up, and fast look-up is essential if we assume, as we do, that what we want to say is not confined only to specific contexts, e.g., sitting in a classroom, or shopping. Also, the typical phrase book by no means has all the phrases and sentences it should have.

The situation is far worse when it comes to grammar books. Most of the phrases and sentences you find in grammar books are — phrases and sentences you find in grammar books! Never, not once, in real life have I ever heard anyone say, in a foreign language, "I walk, you

walk, he/she/it walks, we walk, you plural walk, they walk!" In Latin courses students must memorize all forms of a word, e.g., "hic, haec hoc, huius, huius, huius, ..." Yet never, either in ancient Rome (outside of grammar books), or in the Latin prose the students read, do they come across these sequences of words! We never learned our own language that way.

Even the phrases and sentences in books like Berlitz's that are clearly aimed at creating a proficiency in conversation, when looked at from the point of view of frequency-of-use, are seen to be, well, rather odd. Take Chapter 12 in *The Berlitz Self-Teacher: French*, Grosset & Dunlap, N.Y., 1949, p. 53. The heading is "Qu'avons-nous? What have we?" I ask myself, how often, in the course of everyday use, or attempted use of French, have I wanted to know how to ask that question? Never, that I can recall. Let us go on to the first few sample phrases in the chapter: "Prenez un crayon" (Take a pencil.), "Vous avez un crayon dans la main." (You have a pencil in your hand.) But surely, on the subject of pencils, by far a more frequently-used sentence, or, in this case, question, I would want to say, is, "Do you have a pencil?" The heading of Chapter 19 is "Je vous donne un livre. I give you a book." And the first few phrases in the chapter are the French and English for "I give you the book.", "What do I do?", "You give me the book." Utterly bizarre! Certainly much higher on the frequency-of-use scale for the subject of books are the questions, "Have you read [name of book]?" "Did you like it?" "Do you like to read?" "Do you happen to have [name of book]?" Etc.

Being concerned, as we are, with "what goes with what" — which words, phrases, sentences most frequently occur in close proximity to which other words, phrases, sentence — is being concerned with the *topology* of the language. (Topology is the branch of mathematics that deals with "nearness" at an abstract level.) We have been saying, in effect, that the grouping of words, phrases and sentences in a grammar book is based on a grammatical — a grammarian's — topology. On the other hand, the grouping we are proposing instead — based on frequency-of-occurrence in real-life contexts, is based on a pragmatic topology ("pragramatic" in the linguistic sense discussed at the start of this essay). "Near" in the grammarian's topology is very seldom the same as "near" in the pragmatic topology.

Objection 3: You can't hope to speak a language unless you learn the grammar first.

Reply to Objection 3: Wrong! Grammar comes last, not first! Grammar is something we "gather" from extensive use of a language. We "gather" that it "goes like this" when you want to say something like that. All but a tiny percentage of speakers of a language (namely, grammarians and language teachers and, perhaps, writers) even know the *names* of the grammatical terms — noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective — that they use every day, much less the names of the rules that they follow every day without thinking.

As Curtis argues, learning is a *side-effect* of building and using Environments, an example of an Environment being our proposed alphabetical listing of most-frequently-used phrases and sentences.

A Universal List of Words, Phrases and Sentences

Eventually, it must occur to us that the list of commonly-used words, phrases, and sentences that we develop for one language, will probably be very similar to the list we develop for another language. And so we we have, in essence, a universal list that covers all languages. We need only

do the job once, and then simply add the appropriate translations for each language we are interested in.

Additional Thoughts on Learning a Language

The "Damnyankee" Approach to a Foreign Language

In the 1950's, Noam Chomsky attracted a great deal of attention to his theory of language by pointing out a simple, obvious fact which no one else had realized, namely, that by around the age of five or so, a native speaker of a language is able to generate sentences that he or she has never heard. This fact contradicted the then-generally-held belief that children learn a language by essentially memorizing what they have been taught by their parents and by what they have picked up from playmates.

Chomsky's seminal observation brought to the attention of linguists (and computer scientists) that a grammar (at least a natural language grammar, as well as the grammar for most computer languages) is a set of rules that define an *infinity* of strings of characters (grammatically correct utterances in the language). This in turn reinforced the idea, already well-established among language teachers, that to learn a natural language, you must first learn the grammar.

But I contend that the experiment must be made of the entirely different approach to language learning that is described above, one that might be called the "damnyankee" approach. It is based on the insight concerning Chomsky's insight that, in fact, over the course of a lifetime, we only utter a *finite* number of sentences, exclamations, etc., and, more important, that the majority of these are uttered many times. (I repeat: it would be an eminently worthwhile research project to create frequency-of-occurrence tables (histograms) for words and sequences of words in various contexts, e.g., everyday living, restaurants, low-level white collar jobs, etc.)

I further contend that the number of words and sequences of words that occur significantly often will be surprising low. (Some individuals (authors, poets) are creative in the use of language, but the vast majority of people are not: they essentially say the same things over and over.) These words and sequences of words can then be listed alphabetically, each followed by its translation into a target language. (See the chapter "Instant French" in this book.) In fact, the next logical step has already been taken, since nowadays portable electronic translators are available which allow the user to select an English word or phrase or sentenc from a list and obtain the equivalent, in the target language, spoken through a loudspeaker in the device or written on a display.

In the first sub-section of this chapter, I spoke of "syntactic entities". The term is too general and abstract. I propose replacing it with "linguistic event", meaning, a frequently occurring word, phrase, or sentence that performs some specific function. Thus a short assertion, or a question, or a command, or a short response to a question, or an exclamation, or a commonly-used phrase, is a linguistic event. Some examples, in English:

In the context of the life of a family with children:

"Did you have a good time?";
"Tell your father that dinner is ready";
"Have you done your homework?", etc.

In the context of TV political talk shows:

"In my opinion"
"I think that recent events strongly suggest that..."
"I'm afraid I cannot accept that...", etc.

In the context of business letter or business email:

Addresses and dates;
"Dear ...",
"In regard to your letter/email of ...
"You may recall that on ... [date] we discussed..."
"I am wondering if you have received...";
"I have received/not received...";
"Please give me your estimate for the following work/products ..."
"Please send me a bill when the work is completed."
"How much do I owe you for..."
"In what form do you prefer payment?"
"Please find enclosed my check for..."
"Sincerely";
"Yours truly" ; etc.

There are certainly many such frequently occurring linguistic events in any given context of speech, but the number is not infinite. In fact — if we allow for variables such as names, dates, times — the number is surprisingly small, as can easily be determined by simply keeping a pocket recording device running throughout the day for several days in a given context of speech.

The test of the validity of the damnyankee approach to language is simply to determine if a person, given a list of the typle described above, can "get along" in the specific context of speech in question. If he or she finds a linguistic event missing from the list, then it is added, and the test continued. We will say that the approach is valid if, over the long run — say weeks or months of testing — the number of linguistic events that are found to be missing, grows negligibly small.

A Possibly New Approach to an Old Artificial Intelligence Problem

I suspect that even the branch of artificial intelligence (AI) called "natural-language-processing", the goal of which is to create computer programs that can understand written and spoken natural language, has suffered as a result of an unquestioning adherence to Chomsky's argument regarding grammars.[1] At the very least, I believe that the experiment should be made of approaching the problem from exactly the opposite direction. That is, for the target context:

1. A reader replies, "Your statement of the Chomskian position is too weak; almost anyone would agree with [your criticism]. Where Chomsky departs from obviousness is in his insistance on the primacy of syntax, that is, that the core of language competence in humans is the ability to construct and use grammars."

1. Create a list of the *tasks* (jobs, functions) that are typically performed in the target language. These tasks constitute the semantic categories of the language context.

In the context of everyday home life these tasks typically include

Expressing the state of one's feelings;
Asking how someone else feels;
Asking what someone else is going to do that day;
Telling someone what one is planning to do;
Reporting on what one did;
Asking where something is;
Asking what someone would like to eat at a given meal;
Asking what is on TV at some specified time;
Commenting on the weather.

In the context of a restaurant these tasks typically include:

Asking if the restaurant has certain food items;
Ordering one or more food items;
Asking where the rest rooms are;
Expressing satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the food;
Asking for the bill.

In the context of a TV political discussion these tasks typically include:

Expressing one's response to events *w*;
Responding to the question: Do you agree with *y* re *z?*;
Responding Yes or No and possibly specifying the degree of agreement or disagreement;
Adding information that one feels has been left out;
Stating what one thinks will happen if *z* occurs; etc.

The key point here is that there is a relatively small, finite set of these categories and sub-categories for any context.

2. Create a frequency-of-occurrence table for all words, phrases, and sentences in the context.

3. For each item in the table that occurs sufficiently often, manually define the semantics. (That's right, manually. This might mean entering a command in the program that orders the program to ignore the item[1], or invoking a specific program or sub-program, or ... Manually entering this material is made feasible by the fact that there are only a finite number of semantic categories and frequently occurring words, phrases and sentences, and that one can prioritize the work by beginning with the most frequently occurring categories and items. (See step 4.))

1. E.g., in the case of phrases that serve merely as social lubricants, e.g., "Excuse me, but I am just wondering if you might be able to tell me ..."

Make the resulting program display words, phrases, and sentences that are not in the table as it comes upon them in actual use, allowing the program designer to then manually enter the desired semantics.

4. Modify the categories and the table of words, phrases, and sentences in accordance with actual use. In other words, make the overall program be interactive.

Doing Grammar By Ear

For a sound-oriented person, grammar registers in the ear, not in the intellect, e.g., if asked to decide which of two phrases is grammatically correct, such a person will make the decision based on what his ear tells him, and usually be correct, even though he may not be able to give the grammatical rule that justifies his decision. He often has difficulty understanding poetry on the page, but can immediately understand it once he hears it read aloud by an outstanding reader of poetry, e.g., Michael MacLiammoir, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot (when reading his own poems). Similarly, though he may have had a formal music education, he may find it difficult to read a score, yet be able to understand a wide variety of music once he hears it played.

For him, the best way to study a foreign language is by speaking it with others, or, at least, hearing it read and spoken aloud by native speakers. Ordinary grammar seems to him a peculiar way of codifying a language. In fact, learning a foreign language from the typical textbook is for him a task equivalent to learning music composition or painting "by the numbers", i.e., without hearing how music sounds or seeing what a painting looks like. This can be done, as demonstrated by computer programs that compose music, but the results are crude at best, probably because there are composition "rules" that can only be learned by a person's listening to and playing music — what we might call, the "pragmatics" of music. (There are cases of successful authors who wrote in a language other than their native language, e.g., Conrad and Nabokov. But these authors spent years in the country of their adopted language. I know of no author who mastered a foreign language solely from books.)

Given complete freedom in the matter, the sound-oriented person would be inclined to codify the language pragmatically, as in a tourist's phrase book, or, far better, in terms of sound. He thinks of phrases and sentences as kinds of song that fit certain circumstances. Thus, e.g., in an inflected language like German, he can often guess correctly the subjunctive forms of a new verb once he has been given a few examples of this form in other verbs and understands that the subjunctive is "the mood of the reported (hearsay), the desired or commanded, the supposed, the possible, the doubted; in short...the mood of the *unreal*" — Berger, Erich W., Berger, Dorothea, *New German Self Taught*, Barnes & Noble Books, N.Y., 1959. He intuits the "twist" that that kind of meaning puts on the pronunciation of a verb.

Similarly, if French had never existed, it would have been invented by the academy, where the similarity of its vocabulary, and its nasal quality, make it an ideal form of pretentious English.

Other Observations on Learning Foreign Languages

Words and phrases of a foreign language that are spoken and read under circumstances of emotional stress and excitement are remembered. Thus, there is a simply way to motivate the learning of a foreign language (or a native language!) in high school: simply have all the readings be on the subjects of sports and sex.

No one in the language-teaching industry seems to understand the importance of learning sufficient words and phrases so that one can carry on a monologue, preferably written, in the language one is trying to learn. The following are examples of such words and phrases:

"Let's see, what are we trying to do here?"
"OK, we are trying to read this paragraph."
"What does that word/phrase mean?"
"I don't know. I have to look it up. Where is my dictionary/textbook?"
"Oh, God, I hate this language."
"But I am going to master it."
"Let's see, where were we?"

Knowing these and other related words and phrases is a great incentive to studying, at least in the author's experience. It is a way of making the language one's own.

Is it possible that by affecting a speech defect, e.g., a lisp, we may improve our ability to speak a foreign language we are studying?

In the sign-language used by the deaf, are there such things as puns and rhymes?

On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to understand a language without knowing how to pronounce many, or even most, of the words in the language, as will be attested to by those who have learned a foreign language primarily through reading. It may be true that, in the case of our native language, learning to read consists of learning to associate — to "see" — the sounds of spoken words in printed symbols, but this is by no means necessarily true in the study of a foreign language.

Women are much better than men at learning languages because learning a language is simply learning a set of manners. "One does it this way..."

It would seem that learning to mimic a foreign accent would be much more difficult than learning to mimic a manner of speech in one's native language, but that is not always true. For example, I challenge any male with a knack for imitating accents, to imitate the speech of an over-educated, extremely talkative young American woman, e.g., a PhD candidate in a field like sociology or education the main substance of which is words instead of concepts. The more one is a thinker, the more difficult this task becomes.

What accounts for the peculiar accents that so many upper-class women affect? — that strange combination of theatrical English, British English, and perhaps the babifying of the letter

"l" and the slight suggestion that "r"s want to be pronounced as "w"s. I don't think there is anything profound here: like all women, the lifelong project of these women is to call attention to themselves, but if one is a rich woman, one has another project, namely, to be sure that the ordinary things in one's life — e.g., houses, cars, language — announce how much they differ from everyone else's version of these things.

A co-worker once showed me a remarkable book[1] in which passages in French, when read aloud, could be clearly heard to be passages in English. In other words, sequences of word sounds in French had been combined to produce sequences of word sounds somewhat similar to English words sounds. In line with remarks about the "shift" in the chapter, "Music", we may imagine a set of languages such that, e.g., when you read aloud a passage and started with the first syllable, you obtained a sensible statement in language 1; but if you started with syllable 2, you obtained a sensible statement in language 2; but if you started with syllable 3, ... etc.

Children's Language and Malapropisms

"I used to wonder about childhood and the evolution of our species. It seemed to me unparsimonious to keep expending all that energy on such a long period of vulnerability and defenselessness, with nothing to show for it, in biological terms, beyond the feckless, irresponsible pleasure of childhood. After all, I used to think, it is one sixth of a whole human life span! Why didn't our evolution take care of that, allowing us to jump catlike from our juvenile to our adult (and, as I thought) productive stage of life? I had forgotten about language...and forgotten that children *do* that in childhood. Language is what childhood is for." — Thomas, Lewis, *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*, Bantam Books, N.Y., 1984, p. 61.

One of the greatest pleasures in being around children who are learning their native language lies in the opportunity to observe their ingenious mistakes. For example:

"Watch out for the maneuvers!" (dog feces, i.e., "manure")
"We saw a flutterby!" (butterfly — this is an error that seems to span the generations, and not surprisingly, since the "mistake" is a far more descriptive word than the correct one.)
"They live in the inskirts." (opposite of "outskirts")
"Let's go to a resterlunch." (restaurant)
"I want a hamburner!" (hamburger)
"It's winding out." (analogous to "raining")
"I hate sour-deens!" (sardines)
"They live in an impartment." (apartment)
"Look! An ambu-lamps!" (ambulance)
"I have a pinkle." (pimple)
"Do what we say, or we'll burn you as a steak!"

1. d'Antin van Rooten, Luis, *Mots D'Heures*: *Gousses, Rames*: *The d'Antin Manuscript*, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1980.

Not merely children, but adults as well, are at their most creative when they make mistakes in language, as anyone knows who has friends who are habitual malapropists:

"She's always doing as she seems fit."

"Now, it's true that at this point an interesting party might inquire..."

"I'm sure it would scare the pants out of him."

"OK, she finally got her degree. I don't see why she has to go around taunting it every five minutes."

"If it's outside my parameters, then there's nothing I can do about it."

"Our relationship endeared for many years."

"I'd like to give you another antidote to show that he was not the liar people say he was."

"The dog was running all over the house, peeing in all the furniture, and, as you know, dog urine is extremely pervasive."

"I shutter to think about the colds of the future." (referring to seeming increasing severity of common cold)

"He was a rather opposing figure." (said of a high school football player by a janitor at the high school, PBS radio, June 16, 1991.)

"It makes you realize how much we take for granite some of those who made this country great." (spoken on PBS radio by a man being interviewed while observing Mt. Rushmore)

"If you remove the [car radiator] cap while the water is hot, it can scold you."

"Because of construction, this earea is not available for parking today." (sign outside a parking lot, Berkeley, CA, that was filled with the deafening sound of power tools from the adjacent building)

Of all professions, politics seems to breed the best malaproppers, as evidenced by the Herb Caen quote below, and the following: "Coughlin protest[ed] that honesty always 'caricatured' his campaigns." — Bathhouse John Coughlin, quoted in autobiography of Carter Harrison II, from Wills, Gary, "Sons and Daughters of Chicago", *The New York Review of Books*, June 9, 1994, p. 52.

The following are from Herb Caen's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

"...the Nye house in Oakland, where the subject at the dinner table was malaprops, and 8-year-old James said, 'If you think I'm going to participate in this conversation, you are misshapen.'

"The best malapropper in modern history was not Sam Goldwyn...or Yogi Berra... The real champ was the one-time [San Francisco] Supervisor James B. McSheehy ('This is crouched in language that is perfectly oblivious,' 'This defecation of character must cease,' etc., etc.) but we now have a new contender.

"Vivian Clore of Carmel died last spring at 99 and ever since, her loving family, led by her nephew, Wallace Thompson, has been collecting her malapropisms, many of which go back 60 years. A few samples of many delights: 'I like the convenience of my precious cooker.' 'Did you know that Mt. St. Helens hasn't had an erection in 123 years?' 'I just love that Gaucho Marx!' 'Good news — they finally freed the hostriches in Iran.' 'I'm thinking about aqua-puncture.' 'My favorite seafood? Well, I love prongs.' 'One of my daughters was married in Taco, New Mexico.'

"Aunt Vivian describing the scene when a woman across the street had a heart attack: 'First the fire department came, then the ambulance, then the paraplegics.' Auntie gazing admiringly at a Christmas scene of the infant Jesus, Mary and Joseph: 'Now isn't that a lovely quiche?' And, finally, among her last words, upon waking up after a nap: 'I feel just like Rip Van Wrinkle.'..." — Sept. 30, 1994.

"...Larry LaBossiere and his 3-yr-old son, Myles, at Pier 39, where, after lunch, Daddy says, 'Well, whaddya want to do now?' and Myles says, 'I wanna go to Alka-Seltzer Island. [Alcatraz Island]'

"...Leslie Schroeder's mother-in-law, upon first seeing our eucalyptus groves, gushed, 'Just like Australia! Are there Kahlua bears in those trees?' And...Jane Ace of Goodman Ace's 'Easy Aces' radio show: 'As a housewife I have no equal — I'm a human domino.' 'I got up at the crank of dawn.' 'My husband's waistline is getting abdominal.' ... 'You could've knocked me over with a feather bed.' ... and I believe she originated the lovely 'Perish forbid!'... — Oct. 5, 1994.

"Pat and Don Barber have a neighbor who said she taped 'The Three Tenors' TV show because 'I just can't get enough of that Placebo Domingo'" — Oct. 6, 1994.

"...Nick Diamos, whose aunt Ann once complained that 'San Francisco is a regular Sodom and Glockamorra'." — Oct. 7, 1994.

"...on KNBR, ... Bob Fitzgerald confessing that he had been 'toiling in ignominity.' Tom Turner's Aunt Katheryn once told him that to solve a problem, 'you've got to take a bull by the hand'; upon alighting from a flight to New York, she smiled, 'Ah, it is so good to be back on terra cotta!' Here's Jane Chapman talking to friends about her sister, 'who can't drive at night because she's suffering from borderline guacamole,' ... Carole Vernier reminds me about the letter from a woman who wrote that 'I've got a human interest story that'll warm the shackles of your heart.'..." — Oct. 12, 1994.

"Then, in San Mateo, we have little Steve, age 4, who toddled into the kitchen to tell his mom, Helen Rozzi, that 'Daddy's in the backyard building a fire in the barberpuke.'" — Oct. 17, 1994.

The best collection of interesting, often hilarious, misuses of language I know of — all taken from real life, according to the author — is Richard Lederer's *Anguished English*, Wyrick & Company, Charleston, South Carolina, 1987.