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# Bye bye bobos, hello ninjas as gloom replaces boom



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## WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

**R**EADERS will have doubtless noticed that newly coined terms in the domain of global politics and economics have taken on shades of doom and gloom.

In terms of frequency, top expressions include bailout, corporate rationalisation, credit crunch, financial meltdown, financial tsunami, homedebtor, Jingle mail (sending back the house keys), and subprime, along with the ultimate euphemism for the recession, global economic restructuring.

There will be fewer scuppies (socially conscious upwardly mobile person/urban professional) and bobos around. Bobo? Burnt-out but opulent, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Correspondingly, there will be more ninjas (those who have no income, no job and no assets). But from the ever-hopeful fashion world come recessionista and chiconomics (aiming to be chic despite the recession).

To top it off, and most apposite, was the 21st-Century Fraud Awareness Week in March. Exactly how this week was to be observed was any punter's guess! And what would great-granddad have thought? Will Obamafying and Obamanomics save us?

Barack Obama has coined more new terms in his short time in office than Bush in all of his. What of our own politicians in the honeymoon period? Nicknames and media-coined monikers are few to date. The prize probably goes not to Prime Minister Jandal John (aka 'sackly John or Slippery John) but to Crusher Collins.

The normally merciless media have left the majority alone, but we

have plenty of citations for Crusher Collins. Mostly ephemeral, such terms won't go beyond politicians' graves. King Dick lived on. Kiwi Keith has remained, and so has Piggy Muldoon. But these are few and far between.

The origins of some nicknames can be quite unfair – Judith Collins is still possibly rueing her mention of "crush". But at least we know its origin. Lexicography is riddled with etymological riddles. This is particularly the case with ephemera and folk etymology. People make a guess at a word's origin, but often the most obvious guess is the least likely one.

An example I have recently come across is howdie (midwife) – the term for what is claimed in *Brave Days*, the New Zealand pioneer women text of 1939, to have originated with the greeting "Howd-ye fin' yersel the morn?"

The *OED* editors tell us that, because the term was recorded in Scotland in 1725 such a derivation is not possible, due to pronunciation of the time. It is likely instead that the early term originated as holdie, from hold, meaning friendly, benevolent, kind.

In 1892 an *Otago Daily Times* reader sought evidence for the origin of the term shaproon (a synonym for beacher), as used in New Zealand in 1850 for a whaler who settled on the coast with a Maori wife.

A correspondent provided a full and entwined explanation for it as a mispronunciation of the French chaperon (little captain), but this is doubtful. Professor Arnold Wall in the 1940s suggested that the closely related shagroon (early settler) was from the English shabroon, which

is held by the *OED* as a term for a ragamuffin or a shabby person.

This could solve the riddle. And then there's wowser and Pom, both strongly attested to be one of several forms of acronym.

The origins and development of global recessions can be just as dodgy, with inaccurate claims and wavering forecasts ever evident, and scams and scaly deals being blamed for the "global economic restructuring". (A new application of the adjective "scaly" has developed for what we normally described as dodgy.)

While the expected heavy leaning towards the economic rather than the digital domain was characteristic of the various top word awards for the year 2008, it's possible that a favourite term for 2009 will be palmtop: we had desktop, then laptop and, with even more clever technology, we have the palmtop. Can this technology, and the accompanying pace of word generation, communication and work go much further? Coroners' reports and sick-leave medical certificates might increasingly be stamped with the newly coined diagnosis "data exhaust", which we can apply to both human and machine.

It could be the year to adopt "voluntary simplicity", the term popularised by the title of Duane Elgin's 1981 text, before it all gets too scaly.

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