# A heads-up going forward

Dianne Bardsley

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

READER Sean Anderson wants to know more about the term "heads-up". It is one of those expressions that originated in sport, in this case United States basketball. Originally it was used as an adjective or adverb in the sense of being watchful and aware, but it was soon used as a noun meaning a warning. This has been generalised recently to simply mean information. So if you are not given a heads-up, you will be left out of the loop.

You will notice that I did not use "American" for United States basketball. Nicola Woodhouse reported that a recent Canadian visitor to Te Papa asked why New Zealanders refer to the United States as "America", and pointed out that this usage is perplexing and even insulting as there is more than one America. It is common here to hear somebody say "the Americans were here during the war", meaning US troops. Though "American Indian" and "Native American" refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, we think of them as belonging solely to the United States.

The use of "America" instead of "US" is not exclusively a New Zealand usage, and in the US, we hear much about the "American dream" during the presidential primaries.

Roger Cornforth wants to know why we say "bald as a badger" when badgers are hairy. The two similes "bald as a badger" and "bald as a coot" relate to creatures that are black with a white strip or stripe on the head, giving the appearance of having no hair or, for the coot, no feathers. Bald in this sense means white or shiny — and it is used in the terms "piebald" and "skewbald" for animals with different coloured markings.

Angus Rivers questions the use of "reticent" and "reluctant". His example is from a 2007 review in which the writer reports on a discussion with artist Bill Hammond, about which he writes "... he was still very reticent to talk in depth about a lot of his paintings". Angus Rivers suggests that if Hammond was being interviewed, he was not being reticent.

Well, yes. Originally, "reticent" meant remaining silent. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "reserved, disinclined to speak freely, given to silence or concealment". However, recent usage is broader. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, which provides more contemporary usage, includes "not revealing one's thoughts or feelings readily".

Robin Clarke writes: "Signs seen in driveways and other no-go parking areas are often 'No parking at all times' or 'No parking at any time'. More often they are the former, which seems slightly silly to me compared to the latter. Which is grammatically correct?" Both are grammatically correct but people might find it is less clumsy to say "No parking at any time".

Sue de Berry reports on the increasing use of "going forward" instead of "in the future", and gives an example from a television news report: "... has given Telecom certainty going forward". She asks if it is also found in print. It appears to be used particularly in oral reports and at meetings, and is purported to be more specific than "the future". It would surely need a qualifying description, if that is the case.

Warren Duff has noticed schools advertising a 75th jubilee, 125th centenary and 100th centenary. The latter are illogical — New Zealand schools are not thousands of years old. But jubilees no longer just have a meaning of a period of 50 years. The term is used for occasions of celebration, which explains the likes of a silver jubilee (25 years) and a diamond jubilee (60 years).

Peter Haines enjoyed this sentence in *The New Zealand Herald*: "Lanky and cheekboned, and a singer in her own right, the 40-year-old Bruni has a sexual history that has now replaced the woes of the Paris Saint-Germain football club as front-page fodder". Peter asks what it would mean to be a singer not in one's own right, and what we would all look like without cheekbones. He contributes another usage from the *Herald*: "I was dark on the fact the Air doesn't have a built-in optical drive until Apple revealed the solution to this . . " It seems that somebody missed out on a heads-up.

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