



When meaning peters out among hoi polloi



WE SEEM to have reached a stage in social evolution in which the concept of correctness in many domains is no longer relevant. We are urged to accept the absence of apostrophes in restaurant menus as change and the general dynamism of an evolving language.

For some, such an acceptance is a challenge. When we read a Victorian script we sometimes realise that many formal, specific, and polysyllabic words have these days been replaced by general, non-specific, monosyllabic terms which still seem to make meaning clear enough to the reader or listener.

Sometimes there is considerable difficulty in understanding the tone and meaning behind formal vocabulary. And sometimes, along the way, we have lost the original meaning of terms that we use quite frequently. An example is "row to hoe".

The New Zealand Dictionary Centre has several citations for "road to hoe", more commonly "she's a hard road to hoe" or elliptically "she's a hard road", the feminine personal pronoun replacing a neuter impersonal one in New Zealand English.

A citation from a *Listener* article of December 5, 2009, illustrates this habit, featured more often in spoken language than written: "She's a hard road running a meat company, particularly the biggest in the land and one that has spent much of the past few years up to it's neck in debt." It might be described as incorrect

by some, but we still know what it means.

Another example of evolution from the original term but with the meaning carried on in a slightly different way is "short shrift". Originally, it did not literally mean speedy punishment, as it does today, when it is often expressed as "short shift".

Shrift was the hearing of a person's confession and the granting of absolution. A person before execution was given little time for such a hearing – this was known as short shrift. A 2010 example of this usage is: "They kept on knocking on his door, but he kept on giving them short shift," Mr Reid said." (*Southland Times* May 21.)

Do we ever think of the fact that "peter out" has never actually "petered out" of our vocabulary? The term comes from American goldmining days when black explosive powders were known as peter for their saltpetre contents. Once a gold seam had been fully worked over, it was said to be petered out.

Lotus eaters, those most indulgent in luxurious living, originally were Homeric beings who ate from the lotus tree, turning their back on their old lives and loved ones, to live a life of lazy indulgence.

We might think we know what a macadamised road is, one with a seal of tar, but in fact, macadamised roads, invented by Scotsman John Macadam, originally consisted of granite chips made into a hard and smooth surface



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with the help of a heavy roller. Tar seal was a more modern invention.

So can we say we have got things wrong or has usage just evolved? There are certain terms used today that could be described by some as being used incorrectly, and it will be interesting to see what happens to them in the future – baby-boomer, endemic, and hoi polloi make up a selection. Baby-boomer originally meant a person born in the post-World War II years of 1946-64, a new generation that rejected traditional values. Now, the term refers to a cultural as well as a demographic construct.

We often hear people using endemic to mean epidemic or everywhere, especially in expressions such as “weekend shopping is endemic everywhere”. Endemic means relating to a specific place. Indigenous animals or

plants are endemic when they are found only in certain parts of the land, such as the Castlepoint daisy.

And hoi polloi? That’s a common and a tricky one. It actually denotes the common people but, possibly because of its sound, people confuse it with hoity toity – those who are considered or consider themselves a cut above.

In 50 years’ time, however, the origins, along with the original usages of these terms, could be forgotten.

Perhaps it is time to consider the use of a new synonym for “correct” in the realm of language. “Conventional” is possibly a word with which to start.

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