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## ON LANGUAGE; A Heads Up on Fulsome

By **WILLIAM SAFIRE** FEB. 28, 1993

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Senate investigations churn up testimony that reveals the language not as it is written -- with much of the blood and flavor squeezed out -- but as it is spoken by real people while squirming. The staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has given aficionados of colloquial lingo, as well as students of synonymy, a nice bunch of citations in its recent report on the involvement of our spooks in the Iraqgate affair.

The Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, William O. Studeman, went to his boss, Robert M. Gates, to -- in Studeman's words -- "give the Director a heads up that [ Attorney General ] **Barr** might be calling him."

Heads up! , as every hard hat knows, is an interjection -- the warning cry of construction workers on high scaffolding to anyone who might be strolling by, about to be struck by a dropped hammer. It replaced a longer expression, immortalized in the sobriquet of Look-Out-Below Bernstein, a legendary New York piano mover of the Weissberger Moving and Storage Company.

In most up-to-date dictionaries, heads up is listed as an adjective, hyphenated, extending the old shouted warning to a meaning of "alert, resourceful," as in playing heads-up baseball .

But the Senate testimony shows it used as a noun, and when native speakers stop to think of it, that's the most frequent current usage. To give someone a heads up is to issue something less sinister than a warning or a tip-off -- closer to an alert than to an alarm .

A memo that was of considerable embarrassment to the Department of Justice was a C.I.A. analysis saying that intelligence sources "confirmed" press reports of the involvement of Bank Lavoro's Rome headquarters in billions of dollars of loans to Iraq from the branch in Atlanta. Justice had been pretending it had no secret intelligence about whether "Rome knew," but here was a document that hinged on the verb confirmed .

"What I meant," the C.I.A. analyst explained in the document causing so much heavy sweating in Washington at the Ninth Street Immunity Bathhouse, "was these sources [ the intelligence reports ] were additional information that indicated that they [ BNL-Rome ] knew. . . . In retrospect, perhaps I should have said, this 'apparently confirms' or 'appears to confirm' or 'corroborates.' But we in the Intelligence Community regularly use the word confirm to mean . . . corroborate ."

If that is true, imprecision reigns at our central spookery. Another analyst explained that " confirmed only means 'lends credence to' and nothing more than that," to which Laurence Urgenson of Justice retorted that the C.I.A. had "evaded the problem by torturing the language."

Here is some synonymy to affix to the wall of the language-torture chamber of C.I.A.: confirm , rooted in the Latin firmus , "strong," means "to sweep away doubt with the addition of some authoritative evidence." Corroborate , rooted in another Latin word for "strength," robur , has come to mean "to support a statement from some other source." We have other synonyms for affirming accuracy: substantiate , "to offer evidence to sustain a statement that needs support"; authenticate , "to attest to the truth by an expert," and verify , "to establish proof by comparison to an original or an established fact." All these words are in the ball park of attesting to the truth, but the greatest of these is confirm . If something has been corroborated , it has support, but if it has been confirmed , bank on it.

The Senate report itself makes a common error: "The attempt to draft a public statement also proved difficult . . . going through a number of progressively less fulsome drafts as the week wore on." The word the context suggests was intended here is lengthy , related to abundant or full ; however, the meaning of fulsome means

"excessive, unctuous, disgusting"; on second thought, perhaps that was what the writers intended.

Among the odd locutions preferred by quoted legal counsel was "That was the entirety of the conversation," meaning "That's all that was said," and one gem by Bruce Cooper, a C.I.A. lawyer, who found a way to sound authoritative while leaving open an escape hatch: "I'm sure I probably did. . . ." CLINTON DEFENDER

"WHAT YOU CALL SUBJECT-VERB disagreement is frequent and justified when it serves the subtle purpose of suggesting the unity of two ideas," writes Jacques Barzun, a member of On Language's Board of Octogenarian Mentors (Olbom), objecting to my nitpicking of William Jefferson Clinton's inaugural address. "Your very example of toil and sweat sends us is such a nuance, for obviously the sweat is one with the toil. A plural verb would imply two separate causes propelling us . In the second example, will and conscience , your objection is sound, because you are able to show that the phrase refers to two distinct situations.

"In the each in our own way you are entirely right," Professor Barzun continues, setting me up for the kill, "but might have pointed out that when each precedes the verb, the plural follows; each is not always singular. Hence the tendency to slip into error. But when you reprove each other as wrong for one another , you go against usage and logic both. 'Each the other' surely will take in a crowd in pairs as quickly as 'one another.' See Fowler ('Modern English Usage')."

I don't see Fowler much these days. But surely the man in the house of intellect cannot object to my purist criticism of President Clinton's use of raised when the proper verb is reared ?

"I agree that raised for reared lacks elegance. But it is perfectly clear and no blunder. Indeed, there are contexts in which raised is called for: 'Born on a rundown farm and raised on pork and beans and hard work.' Reared would be silly here, wouldn't it?

"Finally," writes Olbom's Barzun, in a Parthian (not a parting) shot, "in disallowing nor after a negative, you are only expressing a modern preference. In the 19th century, the opposite was generally preferred. G. B. Shaw almost invariably used nor where we use or . Swift had done the same, and there you have the two greatest masters of plain English."

Ordinarily I would raise an eyebrow at the placement of only in "are only expressing," but I think it's a trap.

A version of this article appears in print on February 28, 1993, on Page 6006016 of the National edition with the headline: ON LANGUAGE; A Heads Up on Fulsome.

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