



Jack J. Anderson, Class of '55, has retired from a varied career. His books and other writing may be downloaded for free from <http://www.jjanderson.info/>. His email address is [jack@abq.com](mailto:jack@abq.com). Comments are welcome.

## “May I have a word with you?”

When a teacher said that to me I knew, first, it wasn't an invitation, the word “may” notwithstanding, and second, there would be more than “a” word, there would be *several*, in fact, all probably having to do with improving my behavior, attitude and effort. I can't recall the exact words Doc Harrington said to me when I caused a minor explosion in his early morning Dawn Patrol chemistry lab but I shall never forget *the look* on his face. Gestures and facial expressions can emphasize words and even suggest other than their literal meanings, as all comedians and mothers know.

Words, symbols, languages—that's what we humans do. That ability is probably unique to us, despite Koko the gorilla learning some sign language and Alex the “genius” parrot's amazing vocabulary that changed our understanding of “bird brain.” In Dr. Buskirk's Anthropology class, he taught that all languages are adequate to the needs of their users. Why? Because each living language changes and expands according to changes in the world of its users. New words, phrases and symbols are created to meet each new need, or often words are “borrowed” from other languages.

The Global Language Monitor reports that “Currently there is a new [English] word created every 98 minutes or about 14.7 words per day.” In 1900, the estimated number of English words was less than 600,000. In June of 2009, the English language passed the million word threshold.

Rather than establishing barriers to keep the language “pure” (whatever *that* means), English easily absorbs words from other languages, e.g., *ennui*, *taco*, *hoi polloi*, *ad nauseam*. Estimates of an average English

vocabulary vary widely, from 5,000 or 6,000 words to 15,000 words. The vocabularies of scientists, physicians and lawyers may exceed 20,000 words, or about 2% of the million plus English words.

I have no idea how many English and other words I know but I *do* know I have *forgotten* the meanings of many that once were an active part of my vocabulary. When I encounter one of these words, I feel *sure* I recognize it and *must*, in the recesses of my mind, *know* what it means. But, alas, I can no longer always recall meanings on demand. Sometimes I have an “Aha!” moment later (much later!) and remember the meaning of a long disused word. But usually not. So, I'm often left with the uncomfortable feeling that I'm “slipping” in some unclear but important way.

What is worse: forgetting people's *names!* Names are words, too, albeit a special kind. (The Internet provides many “tricks” to help you remember names.)

For those who have many acquaintances, associates, friends and relatives, it is almost inevitable someone sometime will be called by an incorrect name. It vexes me to make that mistake. I work hard to remember and address others by the names they prefer. I consider it courteous and respectful. But at large social gatherings, my introvert nature clamors to escape as early as is polite lest I stay too long and increase the chances of committing the blunder of forgetting a name or the worse blunder of using a wrong name.

Perhaps these recall slip-ups are to be expected as we age. And nowadays I find I am often far more focused on the joy of the moment than recovering the details of what seems to have spilled out of my memory.

Consider this: At a large family gathering somewhere there is a whispered lament, “Poor Agnes forgets her grandkids' names.” But when Agnes gently cradles the face of a grandchild in her wrinkled hands and draws it near to hers, gazing intently with love into the child's eyes, she knows the *essence* of that little one and connects deeply, even though she may forget or confuse a name sometimes. That bond is more important than her occasional lapses of memory.