

# DARE Newsletter

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## Pausing Over Pronunciation

Anne Curzan

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A little over a year ago, I found myself standing in front of a class of almost 100 students, staring at a pronunciation conundrum. I was reading aloud a couple of key sentences from a quote on a PowerPoint slide, and my eyes jumped a line ahead and saw the word *islet* barreling toward me. Not a word I say aloud all that often, let alone one I have to say loudly in front of a roomful of people.

My brain started searching in a panicky way for memories of how to say this word. “Eye-let!” recommended one voice in my head. Another internal voice countered, “I’m pretty sure I’ve heard it with an /s/ . . .”

Torn about the status of the “s,” I decided to try to turn this moment of pronunciation panic into a teachable moment. I stopped when I got to the word, and I said to the class, “How do you all pronounce that word?”

There was a noticeable pause. A few ventured, “Eye-let?” Then a couple of students said they thought they had heard “iss-let.” One student from Florida confirmed that this pronunciation occurs in Florida. Others admitted that they weren’t sure they had ever said the word out loud.

We checked a couple of standard dictionaries and found just one pronunciation: “eye-let.” So now we know what is considered standard. (That said, I’m not convinced that the pronunciation with

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Photo credit: Scott C. Soderberg, Michigan Photography

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an /s/ won't make enough inroads in American English to become a standard variant. I've suggested to the editors at American Heritage that we track it on the usage ballot.)

Learning the standard pronunciation, however, seems to me not the most important benefit of the pause. We were also able to have a conversation not only about some of the vagaries of English spelling but also about the way our status as an "educated speaker" can feel up for evaluation when we hit some of these tricky words we're not sure how to pronounce. Can we actually say, "I'm not sure how to pronounce that" without getting laughed at?

I was thinking about this story a couple of days ago because I mentioned to a colleague that I had just recorded a radio segment about the pronunciation of the word *niche*. He exclaimed, "That word always gets me! I am never sure how to pronounce it." We commiserated over our shared angst when confronted with this word. Does "neesh" sound too French and too pretentious? Does "nitch" make us sound unsophisticated?

If you're thinking "nitch" must be the new, "bastardized" pronunciation, you are wrong. Many standard dictionaries include both pronunciations. And according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (fifth edition), the current pronunciation "neesh" is a 20th-century innovation, as the word was "Englishified" (my term) to "nitch" soon after it was borrowed from French in the 17th century.

My colleague then added, "And then there's *homage*! I don't know what to do with that one either . . ." I agreed: there's the issue of where the stress goes as well as whether to say the initial /h/. I added the word *forte* to the how-should-I-pronounce-that mix.

I get that my colleague and I both have the letters Ph.D. next to our names, which probably makes it easier to admit that you have words you don't know how to say out loud. And it's easier to

“One of the great things about *DARE* to me as a general Joe is how the project tracks evolution of usages over time and place. All description, no prescription. It's a great feeling to be at the university that gives life to the equivalent of the *OED* for our side of the Atlantic.”

Tom Zinnen  
University of Wisconsin Biotechnology Center  
Madison, Wisconsin

admit being stymied by more esoteric words than more colloquial ones.

The conversation left me thinking, though, about the valuable work that can get done if we're willing to talk about the anxiety that can come with these pronunciation conundrums and open up the space for students and others to put on the table words they're not sure how to say—with no worries that anyone is going to question their education or intelligence if there are words more familiar to the eye than to the ear. And if anyone is laughing, it is out of relief that someone else isn't sure how to pronounce that word. ♦

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## "Mr. Science" Retires

Roland Berns came to *DARE* as a researcher (or "look-up person"), a job which in those pre-Internet days involved trudging between campus libraries to verify quotations used in the *Dictionary*. In 1990 he joined the editorial staff, working as a Science Editor and General Editor until his June 2015 retirement. Roland's primary task over the past twenty-five years was the researching and writing of entries dealing with regional names for flora, fauna, and (as he put it) "the occasional rock or disease."

Although Roland took his work seriously, he did his best to bring a bit of lightheartedness to the *DARE* offices. He occasionally donned a white lab coat with "Mr. Science" embroidered over the pocket, explaining, "I think it makes me look quite distinguished, and I can wear it in the office when it's cold."

We hope retirement will bring Roland more time to enjoy reading, traveling, figure drawing, calligraphy, analyzing monster movies, and cooking. We'll miss his homemade cinnamon rolls and oven-roasted pecans, but perhaps not his efforts to introduce us to edible insects and extreme hot sauces. ♦

## Passing the Baton

Joan Houston Hall  
Editor Emerita

What wonderful friends *DARE* has! Nearly 200 of you responded to our call for assistance, and the result is that the project will be able to retain three staff positions for at least the next year. Many of you sent messages of encouragement with your gifts; others gave in honor of friends or in memory of loved ones. We are exceedingly grateful for all your generous support.

I am happy to formally introduce you to *DARE*'s new Chief Editor, George Goebel. George has been part of the project since 1983, serving as Assistant Editor, Review Editor, Associate Editor, and, most recently, creator of our new citation database. I have no doubt that he will lead the process of updating the digital version both skillfully and energetically.

He is ably assisted by Beth Gardner, Senior Proofreader and Editor of this *Newsletter*, and Julie Schnebly, Proofreader and Digital Text Specialist. Together, the three staff members have sixty-five years of experience at *DARE*! As Editor Emerita, I look forward to assisting as they chronicle our American dialects in the twenty-first century.

As the photos on page 7 show, *DARE* staff—past and present—recently gathered to celebrate my retirement and that of Science Editor Roland Berns. I was reminded what a pleasure it has been to work with such a talented, dedicated, and congenial group of colleagues and volunteers. I have been extraordinarily fortunate to have had *DARE* as my life's work.

I also count myself lucky to have become acquainted with so many of you, simply through occasional e-mail and snail-mail correspondence. Thank you for your friendship, and I appreciate all the warm wishes for my retirement. ♦

“I was delighted to discover *DARE*—I read Vol. I cover to cover. It also showed me how rich and varied our language is. I was an English grammar ‘snob’ and now have a much improved outlook! In our area (upstate rural New York State) I hear variations between families that grew up as neighbors.”

Nancy Lee  
Whitney Point, New York

## Looking Forward

George Goebel  
Chief Editor

The *DARE* offices are definitely emptier than they were! With the retirement of both Joan Hall and Roland Berns at the end of June, the official editorial staff has dropped from three to—me. I say “official,” though, because fortunately Joan Hall, while spending less time in the office, continues to be actively involved, and will, I sincerely hope, continue to be involved for a long time to come. (On a personal note, I would like to thank her here for everything she has done to make the transition as painless as possible.)

Despite the shrinkage, the three remaining full-time *DARE* staffers are hard at work on a number of fronts. Some of you may already have noticed that we recently posted some preliminary versions of new and revised entries on our website, with the promise that they were a foretaste of a series of “Quarterly Updates” that would appear there. That promised first Quarterly Update has now been posted (as of August 31); it replaces the preliminary versions posted earlier with finished versions and adds more, for a total of 63 entries (<http://dare.wisc.edu/words/quarterly-updates>).

For some time now I (and Roland, up until his retirement) have been writing new entries and revising and updating old ones. Until recently, it was unclear when these would actually see the light of day. We assumed that Harvard University Press wanted to incorporate updates into *DARE* Online ([daredictionary.com](http://daredictionary.com)). So it came as an unpleasant surprise to see the director of the Press, William Sisler, quoted in the April 11 *Boston Globe* saying that “any future update would be many years in the future” (<http://tinyurl.com/oe3pcdm>). Clearly we couldn't attract funding unless there was some prospect that our work would appear in the foreseeable future. We wrote to Sisler, explaining our problem and proposing that, with the Press's acquiescence, we would publish both new and substantially revised entries on our website on a quarterly basis. They could then incorporate them into the online version when and if they wished. To our relief, Sisler responded positively and further suggested that the Press would update the online version yearly.

We have never stopped collecting material, and, predictably, in the years since the various volumes were published—thirty years for the first volume—we have accumulated a great number of quotations that extend our knowledge of words or senses

already treated or that suggest new entries to be written. What wasn't predictable thirty years ago was the revolution in our ability to find additional evidence, brought about by the Internet, and, in particular, by the proliferation of searchable libraries of books, journals, and newspapers.

This first set of updates shows very clearly, I think, how much we can add to our knowledge of regional vocabulary.

The new entries and senses show a wide variety of treatments. There are some quite recent things—as least as far as our present evidence goes—like **beach-walk** 'thong' (1956→), **budge** 'to butt (in line)' (1967→), **beeler** 'mischievous tyke' (1992→), and **mop sauce** 'basting sauce' (1959→). But there are also some quite old words that escaped our nets earlier, like **false face** 'mask' (1799→), **bogsucker** 'woodcock' (1849→), **boneless cat** 'paddlefish' (1880→), and **smut n 1** 'card game in which losers are marked with soot' (1849→). There is the usual allowance of terms for obsolescent rural technology, like the Rocky Mountains term **beaverslide** 'a kind of haystacker' and **Old Gappy** 'nickname for a crosscut saw,' but plenty also for things and concepts that are contemporary or recent, like **bodega** 'convenience store,' **johnny n 4** 'hospital gown,' and **nab** 'cheese or peanut-butter cracker sandwich.' The entries **mom-and-pop** and **ma-and-pa** are the first to include data from the recent Online Survey of Wisconsin English, which Julie Schnebly wrote about in the last issue of this *Newsletter*.

Most of the revised entries are much better documented than their originals. This is most obvious in respect to dating; almost all have been antedated by a significant margin, and many postdated as well. The original entry for **candle fly** had quotations from 1956–1969; it is now documented from 1773–2012, for an antedating of 186 years and a postdating of 43. The value of this added evidence is of course not just chronological; in this case it also made it clear that the original entry had combined under the definition “=**lightning bug**” evidence for two quite distinct kinds of insects, which are now treated as separate senses. The entry **haycap** is a similar case; fuller evidence made it clear that the original definition “A covering for a haystack,” though strictly accurate, covered two quite different senses, one of which can now be antedated by 140 years, and that these two senses have different regional distributions. These are the most spectacular antedatings, but there are twenty more entries and senses with antedatings of more than fifty years. The scope for postdatings is of course not as great, but there are some impressive

examples here too, like **backset n 1a** 'setback (not in reference to an illness)' postdated by 90 years, and **beatermost** 'best, most remarkable' by 77 years. There are also many improved definitions, as at **backbone fence**, **Dutch cap**, and **slide stacker**, and improved etymologies, as at **banter n** and **v**, **barrack**, **beatenest adj**, and **gange v 1**.

Updating the *Dictionary* is our highest priority, but progress is being made on other projects as well. The complete tabulation of official responses to the Online Survey of Wisconsin English has been posted on our website (<http://dare.wisc.edu/survey-results/2013-2014>). Further maps will be coming soon, as well as audio files of the telephone interviews.

The “bleeping project”—deleting personal data from the audio recordings made as part of the original *DARE* fieldwork, so that they can be made publicly accessible—made good progress over the summer, in the hands of Project Assistant Christopher Font-Santiago. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to continue this PA position, but we are planning to recruit some student interns for the coming semester, and we have volunteers who are also continuing to work on it.

I hope you will visit our website and explore all the new material! ♦



### In Memoriam: Ivan Doig

We are saddened to report the death, on April 9, 2015, of acclaimed author Ivan Doig. *DARE* contains numerous citations from his novels and nonfiction books, and we were gratified to discover that our work was also of use to him. Ivan was kind enough to write an article for the Spring/Summer 2013 issue of our *Newsletter* (available at <http://dare.wisc.edu/dare-newsletters>) illustrating what he called “the back-and-forth linking Doig to *DARE* and vice versa.” His final novel, *Last Bus to Wisdom*, was published in August by Riverhead Books. ♦





## Staff Member Profile

*In this ongoing series, Beth Gardner interviews Project Assistant and UW–Madison grad student Christopher Font-Santiago, who joined the DARE staff in January of 2015.*

**Q:** What is your field of study, and what are your primary research interests?

**A:** I am currently working on an M.A. in Applied English Linguistics in the English Department. As of this moment, my primary research interests are grounded in diachronic linguistics and sociolinguistics, with reach into areas such as language contact, translanguaging, bilingualism, and language transfer. I am strongly considering continuing my studies here by applying for the Ph.D. program in the English Department when I am done with my M.A.

**Q:** How did you first become aware of *DARE*?

**A:** I first became aware of *DARE* when I was working on a sociolinguistics paper back at the University of Puerto Rico. Naturally, I did not know as much about it then as I do now, but it amazed me to find such a unique and fruitful project I could use as a resource for my research. I believe there should be a linguistically oriented regional dictionary everywhere. Language is ever changing, and efforts like these can truly capture an accurate portrait of the moment.

**Q:** What are your primary job responsibilities at *DARE*?

**A:** I am primarily in charge of managing what has come to be known as the “bleeping project,” where we go through our repertoire of audio recordings and bleep out private information with the ultimate goal of making all of them available to the public at some point in the near future.

**Q:** What is the most enjoyable aspect of your work at *DARE*?

**A:** Having never traveled outside of Puerto Rico until I was admitted to UW–Madison, I was never really exposed to the vast linguistic varieties of American English outside of those commonly found in shows and movies. English in Puerto Rico is mostly a second language, and those who speak it as a first language, such as myself, speak fairly “standard” varieties. Working at *DARE* not only offered me the opportunity to work within an area of interest, but also to listen to and work with many American English varieties. It is a constant process of discovery and adventure every time I listen to a different participant.

**Q:** What part of your work do you find most challenging?

**A:** Nothing about working at *DARE* has proven to be unpleasant, but experiencing our financial struggles throughout the latter part of the last academic year was quite a challenge.

**Q:** What aspect of working on the *DARE* project has been the most surprising to you?

**A:** Learning every day about the sheer amount of linguistic variety in English there is in the U.S. Many varieties are considered “heavy dialects,” but you get used to them fairly quickly and understand them with ease right after that. Language is truly a unique and malleable thing, and studying and working with it is that much more exciting.

**Q:** What sort of employment do you plan to seek after finishing your graduate program?

**A:** This is a huge unknown at the moment, as the academic field has been forced through considerable and fast changes by a variety of sociopolitical forces. These changes are not necessarily positive and could ultimately influence my future career choices. I can see myself being a professor at a university here in the U.S., working on research related to my areas of interest; I can also see myself doing practical work, using my knowledge and skills to further the goals of a nonacademic employer. As long as I am working in linguistics, I will be happy either way. Only time will tell in which direction I will go.

**Q:** When you have a rare moment of spare time away from your studies and your work, what are your interests?

**A:** In my spare time, I like to go sightseeing, travel, try new food, and play online video games with my friends and my partner, who are still in Puerto Rico. I also enjoy playing role-playing games with a local group of friends I met only a couple of weeks after I arrived in Madison. I am grateful for all of them. ♦

# American Dialect Society 2015 Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon

Photo credit: George E. Hall



*Two good friends of DARE: Grant Barrett, co-host of the public radio program A Way with Words, and Allan Metcalf, ADS Executive Secretary*



Photo credit: George E. Hall

*Joan Houston Hall chats with American Speech Editor (and frequent writer about DARE) Michael Adams*



# Retirement Party for Joan Hall and Roland Berns

Photo credit: George E. Hall



Photo credit: George E. Hall



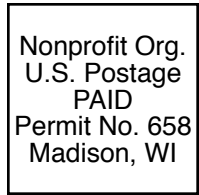
Photo credit: George E. Hall



↘ Joan Hall

↑ Roland Berns  
(showing off a very appropriate card)  
and his wife, Telise Johnsen

← George Goebel  
and his wife, Anna Goebel



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