

The Birth of Roget's Thesaurus

by Garrett Socol

It took British surgeon and inventor PM Roget 47 years to create the thesaurus. When his invention The Hands-Free Umbrella failed, the thesaurus became the esteemed doctor's lifelong obsession. He lived and breathed all things lexical.

An audio tape of Roget's inaugural creative session was recently discovered at the British Library, the London facility that houses more than 150 million items of international importance. The tape was found underneath the original Magna Carta, and according to Senior Library Manager Abigail Cosgrove-Cumberbatch, the discovery was nothing short of miraculous. "The tape was gathering dust for a half century," Cosgrove-Cumberbatch reported. "If I hadn't assigned my assistant Pauline Finch-Halifax to take inventory, we still wouldn't know about its existence, and what a loss that would be."

Cosgrove-Cumberbatch is an avid activist for the English language. "At the end of the day, all we have is the spoken word," she explained. "We may lose our homes, our husbands and our dignity, our children may run far away and refuse to take our phone calls, our friends may dwindle in number, but we still hold onto our language."

Assisted by PM Roget's devoted wife Nan (who was assigned to write everything in longhand), the tape documents the birth of the vital reference book we know as the thesaurus. The following is a transcript:

PM: We should start, of course, with the letter A.

NAN: Not necessarily, dear.

PM: Why not?

NAN: Let's be bold and jump ahead to L in honor of our precious little Lilly. We'll get to A later.

PM: All right then. L for Lilly. L-A-A. Nothing.

NAN: L-A-B. *Lab*.

PM: *Lab* is short for *laboratory*. Not a word unto itself.

NAN: But it's a word people use.

PM: We'll come up with synonyms when we get to *laboratory*.

NAN: Are you sure we shouldn't have at least one or two suggestions for *lab*?

PM: Quite sure.

NAN: Suit yourself.

PM: Moving on. L-A-B-A. Nothing.

NAN: L-A-B-O-R. *Labor*.

PM: Yes, *labor*. Noun. *Activity*. *Endeavor*.

NAN: Good.

PM: *Chore*. *Effort*. *Industry*.

NAN: *Industry* is not a synonym for *labor*, sweetheart.

PM: It can be used as a synonym.

NAN: Not to my thinking.

PM: I didn't ask for your thinking, only for your writing. *Labor* also happens to be a verb. To *toil*, *strive*, *travail*.

NAN: *Work oneself to the bone*.

PM: *Work oneself to the bone* is five words.

NAN: But that's what real *labor* is.

PM: *Work* works. But not *work oneself to the bone*.

NAN: When was the last time you worked yourself to the bone?

PM: You're missing the point.

NAN: May we continue please?

PM: We may not. There are more synonyms for *labor*.

NAN: I'm tired of *labor*.

PM: I just realized something: *Label* should come before *labor*.

NAN: Of course, how could we have overlooked *label*? *Label* is a...*trademark*, *design*.

PM: Also *epithet*, *classification*.

NAN: *Classification*? I think not.

PM: I don't think not.

NAN: Just because I classify you as stubborn doesn't mean I'm assigning a *label*.

PM: It can be construed as a *label*. Write it down.

NAN: I'm bored with L. Let's go to D for our darling little Debbie.

PM: For Debbie. D-A-A. Nothing. D-A-B. *Dab*. Verb. To smear.

NAN: To touch.

PM: No, no no. I can touch you without dabbing you. *Dabbing* implies something on your fingertips like a stinging ointment or a poisonous liquid that I might smear on your tongue while you're asleep.

NAN: Then how about *plaster, smudge, pat*?

PM: Yes. And *flick, peck, spot, stroke*.

NAN: What comes after *dab*?

PM: D-A-C. D-A-E-. D-A-F. *Daft*. Synonyms for *daft* please.

NAN: *Silly, funny, humorous*.

PM: Also *demented, cracked, deliberately annoying*.

NAN: That's two words, dear.

PM: Well, some people happen to be *deliberately annoying*.

NAN: You're breaking your own rule.

PM: I'm allowed.

NAN: And I'm not? How can you expect me to live by a different set of rules? That's the mark of Fascism.

PM: Let's jump ahead to W in honor of our frightful little Winifred.

NAN: Fine. W.

PM: *Werewolf*. A predatory mammal that sucks the blood from its prey. You must have scores of synonyms for that.

NAN: No, darling. *Waste* and *want* and *weakling* would precede *werewolf*, wouldn't they?

PM: They would. So would *wallop*. Verb. To *bash, belt, pummel*.

NAN: *Jab?*

PM: *Jab* is good too, along with *clobber*, *strike*, *slug in the jaw with unrestrained force*.

NAN: What are you trying to tell me?

PM: That perhaps you're right. Perhaps we should include two, three and four-word phrases in addition to singular synonyms.

NAN: I'm glad you finally see the light.

PM: Frankly, I don't know what took me this long.

NAN: Maybe you spent too much time crossing your t's and dotting your i's.

PM: Nothing wrong with paying attention to detail.

NAN: There's a limit. I can judge a man by his i's, you know. If you ask me, his i's are the windows to his soul. *Soul*. Noun. *Spirit*. *Essence*. *Disposition*.

PM: And what do my i's tell you about my disposition?

NAN: That you're a...

At this point, the audio tape goes silent for fifteen seconds. Then there's the rustling of paper and the commanding voice of Dr. Roget.

PM: I will begin with the letter A. A-L-O-N-E. *Alone*. Adjective. *Solo*. *Single*. *Unaccompanied*. *Ecstatic beyond measure*.

The recording continues for several hours without the assistance of Nan.

Abigail Cosgrove-Cumberbatch has listened to the entire tape at least two dozen times and hasn't tired of it. "It's music to my ears," she said, dressed in a conservative but stylish plum-colored pantsuit, the kind of outfit Victoria Beckham might wear to a wake. "Imagine a Shakespearean scholar coming upon an undiscovered work by the Bard. *That's* how thrilling this is. Dr. Roget, I salute you." When asked about the contentious bickering of Dr. and Mrs. Roget, the professorial Cosgrove-Cumberbatch responded, "It's perfectly natural for marital partners to disagree, differ, dissent,

especially during the creative process. When the juices are flowing, emotional abuse and physical violence are often a natural part of the process.”

“Humiliation goes with the territory,” Finch-Halifax added.

“Absolutely,” the vociferous Cosgrove-Cumberbatch stated. “However, I'd like to dispel the rumors about Roget's purported erectile dysfunction. They are categorically false. Unfounded. Erroneous.”

“True,” Finch-Halifax said. “In fact, some experts believe Algerian philosopher Albert Camus was the culprit, creating the rumors, spreading them, and deliberately trying to defile the reputation of Dr. Roget out of unadulterated envy.”

“You know what they say: Hell hath no fury like a jealous Algerian.”

The audio tape has been placed in the Sound Archive of the British Library which also houses the 1902 recording of Sarah Bernhardt's “Phedre,” the 1953 ceremony in which Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England, and the 1996 hit single “Wannabe” by the Spice Girls.

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