

Perspectives

A personal view of the University

Talking Computers

English is richer and more vigorous because we borrow words and ideas from various parts of our lives (sports, for example) to use as figures of speech. The other evening, friends and I listed figures of speech. In less than an hour, we had more than a hundred. Since then, I've heard dozens more in conversations. Try to add to this short list: "three strikes against him," "fumbled the ball," "pulling out all the stops," "hit a sour note," "dark horse," "jump from the frying pan into the fire," "burned out," "on different wavelengths," "in a holding pattern."

Psychiatry, for example, has not only given us new terms to play with (*subconscious*, *Freudian slip*, *phallic symbol*, and *psychosomatic*), it has also changed the way we think about ourselves. Before Freud, we figured the pickles and ice cream caused the dreams; after Freud, we search for the repressed thoughts that produced them. Before Freud, we were forgetful or tongue-tied; after Freud, we wonder what we're hiding from ourselves. It doesn't matter that most of us misunderstand the ideas of psychiatry. The words and ideas, even mistaken, have seeped into the whole culture.

The same thing is happening with words and ideas of computer technology. They are changing the way we talk and think about ourselves, especially the way we think about our minds. The language will become richer for it eventually, as the wheat is winnowed from the chaff (see!).

In the meantime, the language accumulates computerese "vogue words"—words owing their vogue to the joy of showing one has acquired them. Vogue words differ from figures of speech: People use them because they are stylish, not because they are apt. Some vogue words outlast their voguishness and become figures of speech, but many sink mercifully into oblivion. Here are some computer vogue words I

would like to see decently buried:

- *Input* and *output* as verbs go back to 1522, when they meant to install and remove men from patronage jobs. Nowadays they mean "to put data into and produce data from computer programs." I particularly dislike *input* and *word process* as substitutes for *write*, because they capture only the recording or manipulating of words and ignore the thinking, organizing, choosing, and polishing that are the meat of writing. *Input* as a noun is okay if we're talking about data going into computer programs, but anyone who asks me for my input when what he or she wants are my ideas and suggestions is likely to get a knuckle sandwich instead.

- It's curmudgeonly of me to object to *update* and *enhance*. I like the idea of bringing things up to date and making them bigger and better, but often the thing was put out unfinished or defective; the next version may be described as "enhanced," but the real words to describe it are *corrected* and *finished*. "It's fixed in the next release (of software)," by the way, joins "I'll respect you in the morning" and "the check is in the mail" on my list of Great Lies of the World.

- I'll be darned if I want to *interface* with someone when I could speak to, write to, nibble on, snuffle at, or cuddle with him. Marshall McLuhan is in my bad books for "enhancing" *interface* to mean "to come into interaction with," a phrase that takes all the gusto out of getting along with people.

- Nowadays, any collection of written material is called *documentation*, the paper equivalent of *instrumentation*, which used to be dials and meters but became *instrumentation* during World War II. Listen, if you jot down a few lines on how to use the gizmo, don't try to snow me by calling it "documentation."

- *User-friendly* is one of the most overworked computer words around and was denounced two years ago at a national meeting of the American Federation of Information Processing Societies. I don't



As managing editor of SU's monthly computing newsletter, Sarah Webster has developed some insight into the current fetish for computer jargon and buzzwords.

want friendship. If my computer is reliable, powerful, easy to use, doesn't eat my files, and comes with a good user's guide, it can be surly and I'll still like it. *User-friendly* is bad enough in computerese, but now it's creeping into other areas. A recent ad describes a "user-friendly" electronics kit, which in more innocent times would have been "easy to build."

- I actually heard someone say she was going to "access the literature collection," by which she meant she was going to use the library. *Access* used to be a noun meaning "an approach, gateway, or permission (to use)." It has become a verb meaning "to get at or use." Turning nouns into verbs often produces abominations (such as the new verb *to medal* which I heard on an Olympics telecast this summer) and should be resisted. However, my main objection to *to access* is that it's pretentious.

It's salutary to knock vogue words, but it's more interesting to consider how computing ideas are changing the way we think about ourselves, especially our minds. In some ways, computers seem to be like our minds, and the resem-

blance tempts people to play with the idea that our minds are like computers, with random-access memories (RAM), default solutions, and buggy programs. An author, talking about writing first drafts, said "I just dump my brain and edit later."

Anthropologists talk about human facial expressions being "hardwired," that is, inherited rather than learned. Men and women, recovering from divorce, "reprogram" themselves for the single life. A harried supervisor's duties require him to do "parallel processing" and maybe "clear his buffer" between jobs.

On one level, talking about our minds as computers affects the way we think about our behavior. Thinking of yourself as having a "buggy program" is kinder than thinking of yourself as neurotic. "Reprogramming yourself" to live alone is businesslike, but suffering through loneliness after a divorce is agonizing. Letting your brain "go offline" sounds like reasonable routine maintenance, but "not paying attention" sounds like something to worry about. Does using this language help us get a different perspective on ourselves and our behavior? Or does it let us avoid responsibility, deny deep feelings, and refuse to change?

On a deeper level, thinking about the resemblance between minds and computers makes us ponder what it means to be human, what life and intelligence are. We are uneasy, often deeply frightened, when a machine seems to think and learn.

The computer revolution will continue to throw up words and ideas that fascinate and disturb us. If the experts are right, the computers of the next generation, the fifth, will "speak" to us in English, make inferences and judgments, and learn from their mistakes. Boy, that's hard for me to think about . . . uh oh . . . COMMUNICATIONS FAILURE . . .

—Sarah Webster