I am a teacher of writing in a southern elementary school, a vocabulary slaughterhouse where I am only slightly uncomfortable. My days are filled with “dad-gums” and “sam-hills.” My nights are haunted by unpleasant dreams of the grammar patrol arriving at my home and carrying me off to the Department of Corrections.

I am a southern ma’am who is conflicted. I have a heritage of unique phrases and picture-painting euphemisms, peculiar only to the South. Juxtapose that heritage with my reverence for traditional English, and the result is a dilemma surpassed only by that of a “snot-nosed youngin’ in a short-sleeved shirt.”

I like what I hear and what I say, but I vacillate between pride and pique. I glory in the Southernisms of my heritage, and yet I feel compelled to defend them. Something prods me to elevate my language and that of my students above a level that others consider “quaint.” I purport that the “yessums” and the “ya’lls” are not merely quaint but somewhat clever and deserving of their rightful place in the linguistic hierarchy. Thus I have written the following explanation, toothsome to those who embrace traditionalism and shudder at anything that dangles.

To Funter
First consider the word “funter,” a verb best defined as groping. To say, “the lights were out, and I was just funtering around in the dark” would denote stumbling and fumbling because one could not see clearly. Funtering is also used to mean making an effort and yet wasting time. Mother said, “I funtered around in the kitchen all day and didn’t get a thing done.” She meant that she accomplished nothing although she was doing something continuously.

Funter can be conjugated, but some tenses such as present perfect or past perfect are rarely used. Future or future perfect are never used because one never plans to funter. As a matter of fact, one rarely knows an activity involved funtering until the activity is finished. The progressive form of the present participle is very useful: We’re just funtering around with this project. (Notice that funtering is most effective when preceded by just and followed by around.) I cannot envision an instance when funter would be used as an infinitive, but I do remember a classic use of funter as a gerund. A student once commented, “Mrs. T., funtering is just a way of life for you.”

Cotton-Pickin
Now mull over a more familiar southernism: the oft heard “cotton-pickin.”
“Cotton-pickin is a compound adjective often used as a swear word to enhance, exaggerate, or emphasize an important noun. The steady rhythm of the trochaic feet lends itself to our southern drawl and is pleasurable to the ear.

This word is often chosen rather than a common swear word because it is less offensive and therefore more socially acceptable. The irate Southerner would say, “That boy told a cotton-pickin lie!” In addition to showing anger, this hyphenated gem can also be used to show simple disgust: Tulip Kinsey said, “I can’t seem to remember a cotton-pickin thing anymore.” Other adjectival examples are as follows:

1. That is a cotton-pickin dog if ever I say one. (Modifier-Subject Complement)
2. That cotton-pickin dog wet my prize-winning begonias. (Modifier-Subject)
3. Then that dog devoured my cotton-pickin begonias. (Modifier-Direct Object)
4. Watch me kick that dog right in the cotton-pickin behind. (Modifier-Object of Preposition)

Alas, even this versatile word cannot be used successfully as a subjective complement. The following would be considered nonstandard: “Your dog’s behavior was cotton-pickin.”

In standard usage cotton-pickin is never heard in the comparative form, such as, “Your dog is more cotton-pickin than Ralph’s dog,” said Tom. Occasionally the word is used in the superlative form: “He owned the cotton-pickinest dog I’ve ever seen.” Some non-grammarians even combine two superlative forms in an effort to heighten the effect: “That coon chased that dog through the most cottonpickinest briar patch you ever saw.” The preceding would be characterized as a cotton-pickin mistake.

Tookeny
A lesser-known example of adjectival phenomena is “tookeny” (pronounced tookey). This word of unknown origin implies a substandard state and answers the age-old questions: which one? (the tookey one) and what kind? (the tookey kind). It reeks of a quality not to be envied and is associated with people one would not want
as neighbors, relatives, or coworkers. Tookey could be classified as feminine in gender because only women use the word and only in reference to other women, the behavior of other women, or their belongings. Although the word itself is not scriptural, it is nonetheless sharper than a two-edged sword and designed to cut off its victims at the knees, leaving them shinless, legless, and footless.

Through tacit agreement by generations of genteel women, tookey has come to mean the height of inferiority. It can whisper of some minor behavioral inadequacy as in “That tookey Mavis Magee painted her lips sitting right there at the table in the restaurant in front of God and everybody,” or it can indicate a major faux pas as in “Then tookey of Mavis refused to allow her own flesh-and-blood sister to join the Daughters of the American Convolution even though she knew that she and her sister shared the exact same ancestor, namely General Buford T. Putnam of the Louisiana Putnams. Mavis was just doing it out of spite.” In addition, tookey can speak of a more serious breach of etiquette as evidenced by “Lorraine sent a store-bought dessert instead of something homemade to the family of the deceased the day of the funeral. How tookey can a person be? You know she knows better.”

Individuals of the grammarian persuasion should note that tookey can be used cumulatively, but because the English language is quite particular about the order of cumulative adjectives, tookey should always come first. “The Blankenbeckleys live in that tookey blue house on the corner.” The only exception to the cumulative rule would be when adding the word “plain” as in “That hussy Charla Steinwinder is just plain tookey.” In this case tookey would take second place.

Tookey should never be used cumulatively with any evaluative word, even those that seem appropriately derogatory. Evaluative words such as disgusting, appalling, or wretched become merely excess verbiage when coupled with tookey. Once a person, place, or thing has been designated as tookey, any additional assessment, however scathing, would be redundant. Furthermore, be forewarned that adding “ly” would never result in an adverbial form of the word because of the awkwardness in pronunciation, a thing every Southerner strives to avoid.

**Yamamanem**

Lastly, examine a curiosity among contractions — the efficient, tongue-pleasing “yamamanem.” While other contractions are satisfied with joining two words, this unparalleled wonder joins four! And what a fours they are! No other word so neatly combines a possessive pronoun, a concrete noun, a coordinating conjunction, and an additional pronoun of the objective case. Thus “your mama and them” is transformed into yamamanem. In a very succinct manner eleven letters and three spaces are reduced to a mere nine letters.

Most Southerners concede that this word lacks the degree of formality usually required in professional writing, but its uniqueness easily compensates for any deficiency. It stands apart in the English language — the lone unpunctuated wonder in a sea of apostrophied friends. Even the earliest southern documents show that yamamanem never included the apostrophe usually found in contractions. These documents are testimonials to the historical validity of this grammatical rarity.

It is a lesson in economy as well as grammar, and the lesson becomes even greater. Say the word aloud. Notice how replacing the “th” with “n” removes the need to lift the weary tongue and forcefully thrust it between the teeth. Instead the tongue lazily brushes the palate demonstrating an economy of movement as well.

And so I come to the end of my abbreviated sashay past the ivory towers. I trust that I have defended without being offensive and have elevated without becoming uppity. At the very least I have certainly soothed my conflicted soul and guaranteed myself one good night’s sleep.

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