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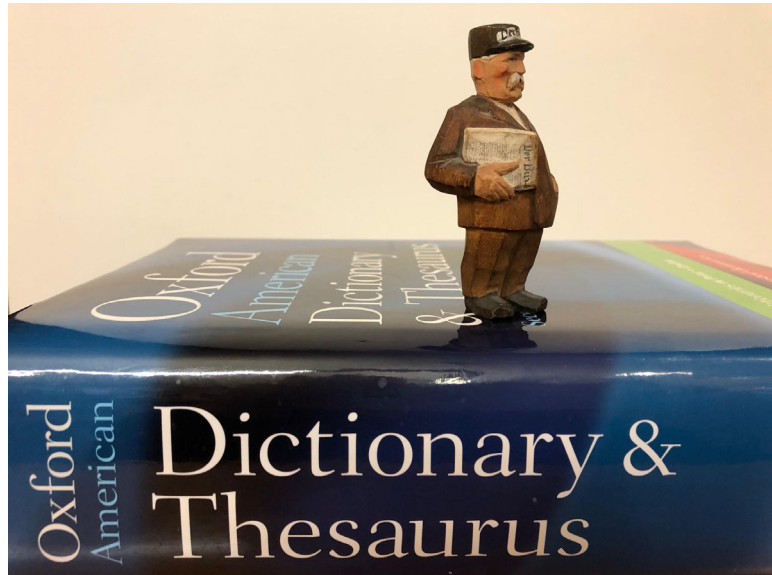
We're Not Able To Stand For This: A Meditation On A Word And Its Meaning

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2554 words



Faithful reader, a scoop. An antic anecdote, thus far unreported, about a word under siege that will take us deeper into the commodious Territory of the Offensive we've been exploring these many years.

My story comes from a friend who has an important book arriving soon from one of America's most distinguished university presses. (I agreed to omit names and titles for the usual reasons.) The manuscript as submitted contained this sentence:

"Terms of the Magna Carta still stand in British law today."

To which the copyeditor, a hard-working member of the much younger generation, said

“Nix.”

I’m sure you’re ahead of me: The copyeditor wished to put the kibosh on *stand*. The word should be expunged, the copyeditor opined, because, my friend reports, “stand can be read as ‘ableist to some people.’”

This latest high-minded assault on core English words escaped its due as an international brouhaha because my friend the author quickly and quietly quashed his startle reflex and rejected the editor’s entreaty before it had a chance to breed. “Interestingly,” my friend noted, “elsewhere the word ‘stand’ (or variations, e.g., ‘certain people stood to gain more than others from this bargain’) was not challenged—or perhaps just ‘slipped by.’”

The questioned usage, we can reasonably conclude without further research, is a metaphor of its biologic root. *Merriam-Webster* gives as the first definition: “to support oneself on the feet in an erect position.” Stands to reason. But *M-W* follows with a list of 27 other meanings (not counting subsets). Other dictionaries slice the word even more finely. That isn’t surprising, especially for a word that has stood the test of time for more than a millennium. That’s how language works.

Taking a Stand on 86 Meanings

Consider the ways we make metaphor from a simple word. What follows may be exhausting but probably isn’t exhaustive. As I attempt to make clear parenthetically under the first half of the headings (the other half are for you to work out), the 86 distinct usages below are meant to illustrate the polysemous nature of the word—its carrying capacity for meaning.

stand(s)

1. what is your stand (position) on immigration?

2. can you stand (bear, tolerate) the darkness?
 3. you must stand (stay) firm
 4. stand (maintain) your ground (position)
 5. you look like you could stand (use, benefit from) a drink
 6. he doesn't stand (have) a chance
 7. my offer still stands (remains in effect)
 8. this shall not stand (prevail)
 9. he took a stand (firm position)
 10. here we will make our stand (defend ourselves)
 11. she walked toward the taxi stand (place for picking up or dropping off passengers)
 12. I'll meet you at the hot-dog stand (cart)
 13. the TV was on the stand (holder)
 14. back away from the bee stand (colony)
 15. she was sitting in the third row of the stands (tiered seating for spectators)
 16. stand (put, place) the book on the shelf
 17. he stands ready (is prepared) for the fight
 18. he stands (has been) accused
 19. he is ready to stand (go to, submit to) trial
 20. she stands (guarantees) security for my debt
 21. copy his letter as it stands (word for word)
 22. I stand corrected (I concede I erred)
 23. he will stand (perform the duty of) guard
 24. she will stand (pay for) drinks
 25. he stands all of (his full height is) five feet high
 26. it's time for a goal-line stand (defensive effort)
 27. stand tall (show courage)
- stand against**
28. we stand against (oppose) tyranny
- stand-alone**
29. the guest suite was in a stand-alone (separate) unit
- stand around**
30. we're just standing around (hanging out), waiting for the rain to stop
- stand aside**
31. stand (move) aside and let her pass
- stand by**

32. stand by (wait)
33. stand by (support) your man
34. stand by (continue to commit to) your pledge
35. he had a standby (unreserved) seat on the plane
- stand down**
36. stand down (back off, stop) before you get hurt
- stand for**
37. I stand for (favor) due process
38. I won't stand for (abide) your guff
39. we stand for (support) the proposition that all are created equal
40. that symbol stands for (represents) unity
41. will you stand (run) for office?
- stand in**
42. she debuted as a stand-in (substitute) for Eliza
43. he stood in the way (blocked, interfered with)
- stand on**
44. don't stand on ceremony
45. stand on your own two feet
46. the house stands on the hill
47. a photograph stands on the piano
48. his laundry stood on the floor for a week
- stand out**
49. she always stands out in a crowd
- stand over**
50. he won't finish his homework unless you stand over him
- stand to**
51. it stands to reason
52. stand to attention
53. he stands to gain more from the attention than she does
- stand(-)up**
54. it's not nice to stand up your date
55. the theory of relativity still stands up
56. she was a stand-up comedian
57. he was a stand-up guy
58. stand up and be counted
59. plastic stands up better than cardboard
60. the contract won't stand up in court

stand up for

61. always stand up for the underdog

stand up to

62. the barn stood up to the tornado

63. stand up to the bully

64. she can stand up to the jeers

stand with

65. we stand with you in your hour of need

standing

66. Einstein's theory is still standing

67. the plaintiff lacked standing

68. he had standing orders to shoot to kill

69. it's a standing invitation

70. he received a standing ovation

71. a standing pool of water lapped the door

72. her standing in the polls has never been higher

73. despite the boos, he's standing tall

74. the performance was standing room only

standoff

75. the teams played to a standoff

standoffish

76. he seemed standoffish, or maybe just shy

standout

77. a standout performance

78. she was a real standout

standstill

79. the traffic came to a standstill

bystander

80. a bystander was struck by the speeding car

freestanding

81. the guest suite was in a freestanding unit

notwithstanding

82. the word stand will survive, the woke critique notwithstanding

standpoint

83. from my standpoint, the ball was in bounds

understand

84. do you understand what I'm saying?

understanding

85. thanks for your understanding

withstand

86. the word *stand* will withstand the attack

Stand and its other forms are not usually condemned when deployed as metaphor. Nothing in the style manual of my friend's book publisher prohibits their use, nor does the Associated Press stylebook, which of late has not been standoffish about calling out even remotely offensive inferences. Why, then, should anyone take these conventional uses to be reprehensible?

The Claimed Sins of Ableism

Merriam-Webster defines *ableist* as "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities." This definition sets out two conditions, which need not necessarily co-exist, and neither of which are sharply defined. The impulse to jettison words related to human capacities stems from the usual function of both conditions—discrimination and prejudice—to exclude. To *discriminate* is to stand in the way, to actively bar the disfavored person from participating in the life of the commonwealth. *Prejudice* has a cluster of related but distinct meanings, particularly a preconceived and unjustified predisposition, usually manifested as hostility against a particular person or group, that prompts disparaging labels, creating an otherness that is presumed to justify exclusion.

Discrimination

Thus, it is argued, a real estate agent must avoid describing the location of a house for sale as "*walking* distance to the train" because it might suggest that the seller wishes to exclude from the pool of buyers a person who cannot walk—that is to say, discriminate against a person in a wheelchair or on crutches. Why an agent would wish to do so is left unexplained; it's simply assumed. Similarly, if I were to say to a student in class, "Do you see what I'm trying to say?" I might be excluding from my query—or my concern—a student who is blind. Discriminating,

without necessarily exhibiting personal animus.

But even if the words in the particular settings above are meant to exclude (and we haven't reached that conclusion), does a writer discriminate against someone with non-conforming legs by observing that an ancient principle is still good law? A word does not bespeak a desire to exclude when it is used to affirm a legal principle applicable to all, including those with physical difficulties, just because the metaphor has roots in an unrelated activity beyond the physical capabilities of a particular person to carry out (oops, is *carry out* ableist?) .

Exhibiting prejudice

A related claim is that to label a person, condition, state of being, or anticipated action by a suspect word or a variant is to suggest that a person without the condition or capacity is perforce inferior to the common run of human beings (double oops: *run* = ableist?). Am I exhibiting animus by expressing such a word? Does using *stand* in the sense that an ancient charter remains good law disparage someone who uses a wheelchair? Does hearing or seeing the word *stand* cause even a momentary twinge in those who cannot walk? If it does, then should I have sought other words in place of *hearing* and *seeing* in the previous sentence?

The problem with this whole line of analysis is its qualitative murkiness. At one end of a very long continuum, it's impossible—mostly impossible? next to impossible? entirely impossible? virtually impossible?—from a word like *stand* to discern evidence of discriminatory bias or a disparaging motive. At the other end of the continuum, disparagement can be obvious—you'd be *retarded* not to see it. In between . . . Does it malign someone with a muscular ailment or

condition to offer a *lame* excuse? If so, is it only because *lame* is used in a pejorative sense? Am I putting someone down when I say *I feel your pain*? Does it diminish people lacking certain physical abilities to say, while nodding to someone else: *I hear you*? Or: *I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole*? Or: *That stinks*? (You can't *imagine* an objection to such sentences? Ever heard of *aphantasia*?)

So one obvious difficulty with the copyeditor's objection to my friend's use of *stand* is that no conversation, and few pieces of writing, could withstand the demands on time and energy that would be required if each of us had to purge our vocabulary of words that have emerged, deep in our history, as metaphors suggested by bodies and bodily functions. (I suspect, without researching or confirming, that body metaphors are widely deployed in all languages.)

A contradiction between the D and the I in DEI?

The continuing demand that we do so or at the least that we be alert to the way in which particular word choices may trigger concerns about offensive utterances likely has its roots in a recent commitment in many institutional settings to foster

both *diversity* and *inclusion* (of and within the student body or the workforce). When you single someone out by a characteristic, you may be identifying the person, in the modern argot, as *diverse*, or you may be concerned about *inclusion*, fitting that person into the society of the whole. The fixed conviction of the DEI establishment is that the two terms are compatible, that they can always comfortably co-exist. But what if they cannot?

Consider an example of the difficulties encountered in sniffing out (did I just attack people with *anosmia*?) anti-DEI expressions.

Suppose you read that a teenager with cerebral palsy has just been elected prom king. Is it ableist (remember, that's a bad thing) to share a post about his election because you think it's heartwarming that teens would elect him? Yes, reports *The Washington Post*, in a feature on "ableist thinking":

Why is it ableist? Well,

It's fine to feel happy that someone with a disability was not discriminated against and was able to have a fun opportunity, said Amy Scherer, a senior staff attorney for the National Disability Rights Network.

"But that is different from making a big production out of the fact that this happened," she explained. A teen winning prom king is "not that big of a deal," she said.

This kind of story is often referred to as "inspiration porn," which presents disabled people who do ordinary things as extraordinary or inspirational. Often these stories focus more on what the non-disabled people did to "help" the disabled person, according to Mia Ives-Rublee, director of the Disability Justice Initiative at the Center for American Progress.

"What is so noxious about inspiration porn is taking away the ability for the disabled

*person to tell their own story,"
Ives-Rublee said.*

This explanation encompasses several rhetorical and logical difficulties. First, it doesn't follow that sharing with others one's own satisfaction that a disabled student was treated nicely "make[s] a big production" of it. It harms no one to address others in reporting welcome news.

Second, so what if it does make a fuss about it? Winning the prom king title is always some sort of big deal or it wouldn't be reported. It may not be a big deal that someone wins a multi-million lottery, since sooner or later someone always wins, but it is a very big deal to the winner and to the millions of saddened losers.

And, third, it's all the more big a deal, with all respect to Ms. Scherer, when the winner is someone whose physical characteristic has historically precluded his even being in the running. What may be ordinary for the "ordinary" winner may be much more than that for the kind of person who until now has not (or rarely) succeeded. That's what being newsworthy means.

Otherwise, fourth, the logic of Ms. Ives-Rublee's complaint about presenting disabled people as extraordinary when they do "ordinary things" suggests that it was sexist for newspapers in 2016 to have trumpeted that Hillary Clinton was the first woman to be nominated by a major party for president of the United States. After all, it's quite ordinary for men to be party-nominated.

Fifth, if a story about the newly elected prom king showcases the inspirational work of his helpers and obscures facts about the winner himself, then condemn the writers and editors

for sloppy journalism. That doesn't take away the disabled person's capacity to tell his own story, though it may be ableist to have spurned his tale.

Taken together, these complaints about ableism may amount to a disconnect between diversity and inclusion. The story about diversity is that a student with cerebral palsy, ordinarily not considered for the role of prom king, was not only taken into account but elected. But the story about election, according to the naysayers whom the *Post* quotes, ought to be about reducing the winner to "normalcy," to downplaying or perhaps ignoring (though I grant no one actually said that) the very fact of the diversity that makes the story newsworthy.

Or it's saying that by pointing to a particular characteristic that will define a diverse group, we may no longer use analogically or metaphorically a word that might be employed to identify those who do not share the characteristic. Is that inclusion—or exclusion of a different kind?

I'm still trying to sort it out. More on this theme, therefore, in the next post. I hope you can stand the wait.