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Today, whilst cogitating on whether I had brain cancer or just a headache from smelling cabbage cooking, I decided instead to cogitate on the word “exploit.” I thought deeply about what it means *to exploit*, because that’s what I wanted to write about. I came face to face in the process with one of the more insidious curses to which writers are subject, which I will term “lexicopathy” with the full knowledge that this name has probably already been taken by a Croatian metal band and is stapled to utility poles across Zagreb even as I write this. My defense will be that I don’t speak Croatian and so can’t be held accountable.

Lexicopathy, as I have defined it, is the condition that arises when writers get so close to a word that they get the urge to dismantle it and play with the structural components as though they were parts from an Erector set (with which activity I was, not surprisingly, inordinately enamored as a lad). More to the point, it prevents said writers from actually *writing* anything (which many will no doubt consider a salutary result) and instead lures them along the primrose path to a secret garden where the similarity between *etymology* and *entomology* is revealed to be no mere linguistic coincidence.

Crawling around on the bark and buds of the tree of English are a plethora of multi-legged beasties, prominent among which are the adjective-flies, noun-beetles, verbipedes, pronoun-bugs, adverbbydids, gerund-hoppers, conjunction-worms, preposition-mites, and participle-thrips. Interjection-midges can often be found buzzing in the writer’s face in an annoying manner, surprisingly loud for their tiny size. The forest floor is aswarm with armies of article-ants. (Two species are present: definite and indefinite; the latter are much more difficult to pin down.) This is where words go to be broken down, digested, and regurgitated as new offerings to provide the folks who compile dictionaries with a robust livelihood.

Those suffering from lexicopathy are able miraculously to see and interact with these grammaranimals and the curious world they inhabit. To a normal person the word “exploit” is just that: a word, a sequential list of alphabetic characters that forms a unit we English speakers have been taught to interpret in a certain manner. It creates an abstract image in our minds—a concept with specific associated memories and constructs. When the system works right it’s more or less the same concept for me as it is for you. To the denizens of the secret garden, however, “exploit” is a juicy, crunchy, sweetmeat ripe for the feasting. They pull it apart like a succulent crab leg and suck out the savory marrow, accompanied by a cool, refreshing mixed metaphor salad.

Let us begin this lexicological repast with the prefix, a very fine place to start. “Ex” is one of the more versatile of two-letter Latin expropriations, being gainfully employed in words sprinkled liberally throughout the dictionary. (Most of them are located in the “E’s,” come to think of it, but you get my drift.) (By “Latin” I mean, incidentally, “Roman.” How “Latin” came to be applied as well to those with a rich and complex heritage based on a *mélange* of Spanish and indigenous Mesoamerican/South American cultures is puzzling to me, but then so are a great many other things in life.)

“Ex” can indicate “out of,” “landed from,” “former,” “exclusive of,” “drive out,” “not including,” “no longer occupying,” and several other related meanings. The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition), in fact, spans two pages (pp. 480–481) in an exploration of “ex.” It has gained a measure of modern linguistic notoriety serving as the monosyllabic representation, often uttered harshly, with venomous disdain, and occasionally accompanied by forcible expectoration, for a former significant other. “Ex” additionally morphed into prefixes like “ef” and “eb” over time, or so sayeth the venerable OED. It may also be heard in the classic pre-WWII college cheer: “give ‘em the ex, give ‘em the ex, give ‘em the e-x ex!” At least, that’s what it sounded like to me watching old cartoons before dawn on Saturday mornings in the ‘60s. It could have been the intense sugar buzz affecting my hearing.

“Ploit” has no real meaning by itself (although “ploiter” once signified to putter around ineffectively), except as an acronym for “Path Loss Over Irregular Terrain.” However, a few minutes’ consideration will reveal that this is singularly appropriate. To navigate successfully to one’s destination is to “pilot.” Why, then, wouldn’t an unsuccessful application of that procedure be to “ploit”? Why, it’s as sensible as lemon in your iced tea.

This brings us around once again, somewhat the worse for wear, to “exploit.” By now you’re probably looking at that word in a wholly different light (the day having worn on considerably since you started reading, slowly). Our little bout with lexicopathy has left us weak, perspiring, and vaguely nauseous: true. But in exchange it has whisked away a deceptive camouflage covering the rich tapestry woven by that simple and increasingly oft-encountered infosec cliché, e-x-p-l-o-i-t. Let me hear you say it. No, wait until you’ve finished swallowing your coffee first. Jiminy. I can’t take you *anywhere*.

Employing our newfound lexicological onion-peeling skills, let us drag our word of the day over under the streetlamp and examine its components more closely: “out of,” “landed from,” “former,” “exclusive of” “drive out,” “not including,” or “no longer occupying,” “path loss over irregular terrain.” Here, then, is the deceptively simple-appearing word “exploit,” which the unwashed masses so smugly assume they understand, laid out bare naked on the driveway. We alone are able to derive its true meaning from our examination of the deepest roots: those that lay shrouded in shadows in the secret garden. We alone are enlightened. (I must admit that many of my trips to the dictionary leave me endarkened.)

After exhaustive examination of the historical evidence, and taking into account the various etymological elements that come into play—bearing in mind, of course, the principles of *enfilade* and *defilade* and cross-indexing to the commodities markets—we are able to synthesize using least-reasoning analysis a definition for “exploit” that well and truly represents both its simplistic overt and more complex underlying metaphoric linguistic fabric (85% cotton, 10% silk, 5% Rhodesian ridge-

back iguana hair. Machine wash, dry in the microwave using the “artichoke hearts casserole” setting).

Where was I? Oh, yes—the definition of “exploit.” That’s easy: a retired dyslexic aircraft operator. I have no idea how this relates to taking advantage of computer vulnerabilities. Possibly a misunderstanding.

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