

You Might Need Mazel to Say What You Mean

By Irv Sternberg

Consider the dilemma of the foreign-born young man or woman who is struggling to learn English as a second language. They are taught that one mouse becomes “mice” if there is more than one. But more than one house becomes “houses.” And while the newcomer struggles with this inconsistency – and many more – they must learn the many slang terms which form almost a second English language.

When I was a young man, if I called a girl fat I was insulting her. In more current times, the word “phat” could mean great, wonderful or terrific. A couple who is “intense” is serious; a “dingbat” is a less than an intelligent person; a “kegger” is a beer party; someone “just off the boat” is naïve or uninformed; and if you’re “jerking me around” you’re “pulling my leg” or wasting my time.

More timely slang includes such new words as “mezzed” for messed, and the phrase “pump and dump,” means a one-night stand, or to drive off without paying for gas. I used to think that anyone who was “sick” suffered from a physical or mental illness. Some young people today use that word to mean you are cool or awesome. Is it any wonder I’m as confused by current conversation as the immigrant who “just got off the boat?”

And then there’s the complexity of English grammar and proper usage. Despite drills in English class, so many of us still puzzle over whether to use *that or which, who or whom*, not to mention the conundrum created when we must select a pronoun. I cringe when I hear an adult, who should know better, say: “Me and him went to a nice restaurant,” or “my grandmother left a generous inheritance to my sister and I.”

If all that isn’t enough to send José back to Mexico City, consider the influence of previously-arrived immigrants whose native tongue has infiltrated the English we learned growing up. Italian, Irish, Polish, Germans and others – all have contributed to the richer vocabulary we have today. In my old neighborhood in Newark, N.J., I learned that a “goombah” was an Italian relative; “blarney” was an Irishman’s exaggeration; and “kaput” in German meant broken. Most of the Polish words I learned I can’t repeat here. After all, I learned them in the street.

And then there are the Yiddish words spoken by my mother and father when they didn’t want my sister and me to know what they were talking about. In the New York metropolitan area, where there are more than two million Jews, the English language is spoken with a generous dose of Yiddish terms: *chutzpah* means nerve, *schlepp* means to carry something, *mazel* means luck. You even hear it in the most staid corporate offices in Manhattan. Some of my non-Jewish friends back East know more Yiddish than I do.

Colin Powell, before he became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs-of-Staff and Secretary of State, worked for a Jewish merchant as a kid in the South Bronx and learned to converse fluently in Yiddish, the language of east European Jews. Imagine a black kid chatting with a bearded rabbi in a baby-equipment store in the 1950s, and then later discussing world affairs in Yiddish with the Prime Minister of Israel.

Only in America!