

war, you obviously prepare for war. Kind of shuts off other approaches, doesn't it?

►DONALD J. MONTGOMERY
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

'Rule of Thumb' Objection Overruled

The February 1994 issue of PHYSICS TODAY (page 126) includes a letter by Jack Straton complaining about the term "rule of thumb." Straton claims that the term derives from the size of switches with which men were permitted to whip their wives up to at least the first quarter of the 19th century and therefore it ought never to be used again. He mentions the writings of several authors on wife beating as if they were pertinent, but none of them provides evidence to support his thesis about the origin of "rule of thumb."

Now, I'm opposed to beating wives (and spinsters and husbands and bachelors and children and dogs and cats and parakeets, for that matter). I'm also opposed to inventing data to make a point, and Straton's argument is pure invention. There's no way to tell, of course, whether he is the inventor or a dupe of someone else.

Dictionaries reflect historical usage. The unabridged *Merriam-Webster Third New International Dictionary* doesn't mention Straton's novel definition and etymology. Neither does the second edition. Neither does the unabridged *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. Neither does Eric Partridge's exhaustive *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. Neither does Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* or Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* or the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* or Nigel Rees's *Why Do We Say . . . ?* or any of a dozen similar books I've checked, dating back to 1835.

Neither does the *Oxford English Dictionary* (or its *Supplement*), although it does cite a number of instances of the phrase's use. The first appeared in 1692. All of them hold the meaning we commonly employ today.

In *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken, a respected philologist and lexicographer among other things, warned us to beware of folk etymologies. No matter how intuitively correct an assumed relation between words may feel, it's usually wrong. Only careful historical investigation is likely to determine the accuracy of such relations.

Mencken was as concerned about other forms of ignorance as he was about ignorance of language. In *A Book of Prefaces*, he mentioned "the virulence of the national appetite for bogus revelation." Putting the best face on the matter, Straton seems to have fallen victim to this appetite. A wicked side effect is that, by getting his letter published, he stands a good chance of whetting someone else's as well.

But that's not the main reason I'm writing.

Pretend for a moment that Straton is right and that "rule of thumb" actually had that odd meaning in the early 1800s. His thesis is that words can only be used the way they were when they entered the language. But languages change. Words lose meanings, add meanings, change meanings. If we let the Stratons of the world constrain us, how could we discuss "spins" or "strings" or "beauty"? The idea that each term we use can be used only one way is absurd. It is abhorrent. It is irrational.

Straton's rule of word use would destroy the richness of English. It would tie meanings forever to etymological origins.

If Straton insists on being politically correct, let him start by being correct. But even if he learns to get his facts straight, he will continue to be wrong every time he tries to promote the fossilization of English.

►JERRY V. TOBIAS
Ledyard, Connecticut

Since reading Jack Straton's letter, I have conducted an unscientific survey among the women around me. I asked militant and conservative, black and white, learned and learning, young and old. Not one had any inkling of Straton's supposed origin of the phrase "rule of thumb." If they expressed any curiosity as to why I asked, I showed them the reason for my question. The reaction was universal: They laughed. They all thought the letter as ridiculous as I did. To link physicists with the violence against women in the United States, even by inference, is unconscionable.

As a Mexican-American am I supposed to bristle if someone uses the term "bean counters" for statisticians? Should I find some slight if someone talks about "sour grapes"?

I have not been deputized to speak for any other Mexican-Americans, and I am sure that Straton does not speak for me. I resent his claim that as a group we physicists must "educate ourselves." People of goodwill will put more importance on intent than on a particular word or phrase. As a member of a minority

group, I have never expected anyone to give me any special consideration. I expect to be treated as just another individual.

►DIEGO ENCISO
Troy, Michigan

Jack Straton's letter linking the use of the idiom "rule of thumb" with modern-day violence toward women prompted me to expose another example of social insensitivity in the technical jargon.

Why do we use the phrase "master-slave" in the technical description of the edge-triggered flip-flop? After all, slavery has been a blot on civilization since at least the time of the bondage of Jews in ancient Egypt. In sympathy with the suffering imposed by slavery, I propose a more socially neutral phrase, such as "team leader and significant other," to describe the operation of edge-triggered flip-flops.

Well, while I await the reprinting of the TTL data book as one measure in righting the injustices resulting from the aftermath of slavery, such as the segregation and racial discrimination that clearly still exist in this country, I wonder if the trivial prescriptions offered by Straton and myself only delay the day when serious measures to right these injustices will be implemented.

Nevertheless, in the future, my rule of thumb will be to avoid rules of thumb. I'll do the derivation instead.

►MICHAEL S. MAZZOLA
Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, Mississippi

Correction

January, page 40—Figure 4 is from C. Durfee, J. Lynch, H. M. Milchberg, *Opt. Lett.* **19**, 1937 (1994). ■

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