

**January 31, 2010**

ON LANGUAGE

**Crash Blossoms**By **BEN ZIMMER**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning once gave the poetry of her husband, Robert, a harsh assessment, criticizing his habit of excessively paring down his syntax with opaque results. “You sometimes make a dust, a dark dust,” she wrote him, “by sweeping away your little words.”

In their quest for concision, writers of newspaper headlines are, like Robert Browning, inveterate sweepers away of little words, and the dust they kick up can lead to some amusing ambiguities. Legendary headlines from years past (some of which verge on the mythical) include “Giant Waves Down Queen Mary’s Funnel,” “MacArthur Flies Back to Front” and “Eighth Army Push Bottles Up Germans.” The Columbia Journalism Review even published two anthologies of ambiguous headlines in the 1980s, with the classic titles “Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim” and “Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge.”

For years, there was no good name for these double-take headlines. Last August, however, one emerged in the Testy Copy Editors online discussion forum. Mike O’Connell, an American editor based in Sapporo, Japan, spotted the headline “Violinist Linked to JAL Crash Blossoms” and wondered, “What’s a crash blossom?” (The article, from the newspaper Japan Today, described the successful musical career of Diana Yukawa, whose father died in a 1985 Japan Airlines plane crash.) Another participant in the forum, Dan Bloom, suggested that “crash blossoms” could be used as a label for such infelicitous headlines that encourage alternate readings, and news of the neologism quickly spread.

After I mentioned the coinage of “crash blossoms” on the linguistics blog Language Log, having been alerted to it by the veteran Baltimore Sun copy editor John E. McIntyre, new examples came flooding in. Linguists love this sort of thing, because the perils of ambiguity can reveal the limits of our ability to parse sentences correctly. Syntacticians often refer to the garden-path phenomenon, wherein a reader is led down one interpretive route before having to double back to the beginning of the sentence to get on the right track.

One of my favorite crash blossoms is this gem from the Associated Press, first noted by the Yale linguistics professor Stephen R. Anderson last September: “McDonald’s Fries the Holy Grail for Potato Farmers.” If you take “fries” as a verb instead of a noun, you’re left wondering why a fast-food chain is cooking up sacred vessels. Or consider this headline, spotted earlier this month by Rick Rubenstein on the Total Telecom Web site: “Google Fans Phone Expectations by Scheduling Android Event.” Here, if you read “fans” as a plural noun, then you might think “phone” is a verb, and you’ve been led down a path where Google devotees are calling in their hopes.

Nouns that can be misconstrued as verbs and vice versa are, in fact, the hallmarks of the crash blossom. Take this headline, often attributed to The Guardian: “British Left Waffles on Falklands.” In the correct reading, “left” is a noun and “waffles” is a verb, but it’s much more entertaining to reverse the two, conjuring the image of breakfast food hastily abandoned in the South Atlantic. Similarly, crossword

enthusiasts laughed nervously at a May 2006 headline on [AOL News](#), “Gator Attacks Puzzle Experts.”

After encountering enough crash blossoms, you start to realize that English is especially prone to such ambiguities. Since English is weakly inflected (meaning that words are seldom explicitly modified to indicate their grammatical roles), many words can easily function as either noun or verb. And it just so happens that plural nouns and third-person-singular present-tense verbs are marked with the exact same suffix, “-s.” In everyday spoken and written language, we can usually handle this sort of grammatical uncertainty because we have enough additional clues to make the right choices of interpretation. But headlines sweep away those little words — particularly articles, auxiliary verbs and forms of “to be” — robbing the reader of crucial context. If that A.P. headline had read “McDonald’s Fries Are the Holy Grail for Potato Farmers,” there would have been no crash blossom for our enjoyment.

Headline writers have long been counseled to beware of ambiguity. “Ambiguous words often lead to ludicrous and puzzling headline statements,” Grant Milnor Hyde wrote in his 1915 manual, “Newspaper Editing.” “They can be avoided only by great care in the use of words with two meanings and especially words that may be used either as nouns or verbs.” More recently, in the 2003 book “Strategic Copy Editing,” the [University of Oregon](#) journalism professor John Russial offered this rule of thumb: “As the word count drops, the likelihood of ambiguity increases.” He advises copy editors to think twice about trimming the little words.

The potential for unintended humor in “compressed” English isn’t restricted to headline writing; it goes back to the days of the telegraph. One clever (though possibly apocryphal) example once appeared in the pages of [Time](#) magazine: [Cary Grant](#) received a telegram from an editor inquiring, “HOW OLD CARY GRANT?” — to which he responded: “OLD CARY GRANT FINE. HOW YOU?” The omitted verb may have saved the sender a nickel, but the snappy comeback was worth far more.

The space limitations of telegrams are echoed now in the terse messages of texting and [Twitter](#). News headlines, however, are not so constrained these days, since many of them appear in online outlets rather than in print. (And many print headlines are supplanted online by more elastic “e-heads.”) But even when they are unfettered by narrow newspaper columns, headline writers still sweep away those little words as a matter of journalistic style. As long as there is such a thing as headlines, we can count on crash blossoms continuing to blossom.

*Ben Zimmer is the executive producer of [visualthesaurus.com](#).*

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)