

## The Problem Has Always Been in the Lexicon

Many years ago, I was tagged to create a fictitious dialogue that would pass for the writings of a shop owner in turn of the century New York City's Five Points district, who was describing life in his neighborhood. The assignment fell to a committee of three, including myself, an urban archeologist and a historical anthropologist. The final product was no longer than this article and took several months to create. The problem, as we were about to learn, was with the Lexicon. Even the span of 100 years greatly changes the words and phrases we use, so much so that if the truth were to be known it becomes yet another foreign language.

This is not the only example of lexiconic landmines; I learned a long time ago that it is often more simple to interpret an old foreign tongue than to understand the written word from just a few years ago in your own. When reading Caesar's war chronicles, the phrase "Gallia Est Omnis Divisa in Partes Tres," is easily understood by any scholar with a terms worth of Latin language training; "All Gaul (France) is divided into three parts..." The only word that might need research to the untrained is Gallia. Those words were spoken over 2000 years ago, but a much later writer, Geoffrey Chaucer, who was writing in Middle English 1400 years later may be more familiar in sound, but non-the-less more difficult to translate into modern prose. For example, "Whanne that April with his shoures sote  
The droughte of March hath perced to the rote." (*Canterbury Tales. Prologue. Line 1.*); roughly translated this is the forefather of "April Showers Bring May Flowers." But it is certainly not English prose as we know it today.

Possibly the best "modern" translation of common 19<sup>th</sup> century American English into 21<sup>st</sup> century writing concerns a little ghost story we fell upon recently, not too far from Jefferson, TX. A little girl was with her extended family, picnicking near an antebellum cemetery, on what had once been the front lawn of family's ancestral plantation. The child delivered a message, as if in trance, saying, "I am Octoroon!" Here is a word not likely to be found in Webster's and certainly not in common usage today! An Octoroon is a person of one-eighth black blood, the offspring of a quadroon and a white; the term was in common usage only in Southern States in and around 1850, certainly not a word known by a preschooler!

This, of course, brings us to the topic of the week, our lexicons and the ability to communicate and interpret others' research. A hundred years ago Catherine Crowe wrote at length about the ghostly research of her day, yet every chapter is accentuate with terminology in common use in her generation and often lost to our own. Techniques and devices used by researchers simply no longer exist.

In order to level the playing field, the ASUP attempted years ago to create a lexicon of their own, but it is totally inadequate and would need to be updated regularly, simply because a week does not pass that we don't encounter a new word or phrase. This creates a quandary; if we do not learn from our history, we are ever bound to have to relive it, but that history might well have been written in an ancient form of Farsi for most of us.

Even when working on my historic project in New York City, which was centered on a little plot of excavated crossroads at the Five Points, the pottery and silverware found at the site were more telling than some of the paper records uncovered. In one case there was a sort of order book found, but half the items listed no longer could be found in our reference works. There were, I

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might add suggestions that the residents of that little dig area were superstitious and sought ways to ward off evil, but exactly of what nature is still a bit of a mystery.

The key to being concise in an investigation of an older site lies with the interpretation and many times we “Assume” too much for our own good. An excellent example of this can be found among modern biblical scholars who run into a problem when reading the New Testament. Throughout those books, Jesus is often quoted objecting to hypocrites.

One example states, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense, make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”*  
— Matthew 23: 14-15 .

So, what’s the problem? Jesus lived and died in the first century of what is called the Common Era or 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. (Anno Domini). Hypocrites lived 500 years before Jesus, and was a physician born in 460 BCE (Before the Common Era) on the island of Cos, Greece. He became known as the founder of medicine and was regarded as the greatest physician of his time. He based his medical practice on observations and on the study of the human body. He held the belief that illness had a physical and a rational explanation. He rejected the views of his time that considered illness to be caused by superstitions and by possession of evil spirits and disfavor of the gods and formulated what is now called the Hippocratic Oath of the Physician, which in part states that the physician shall do no harm to his patients. Simply put, how did the name of a healer and ethical advocate become part of a negative use of his name.

By definition, **hyp·o·crite** (**hip**·**o**·**krite**), *n.*

1. a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, esp. a person whose actions belie stated beliefs.

Historians now question how a Jew from Palestine came to know of Hypocrites in the first place, never mind create a negative connotation about his beliefs. While this obviously falls far from our own field of reference, the problem faced here is universal. Did later writers of the New Testament, some of whom travelled widely, adopt the term and incorporate it into their telling of the story of Jesus? Probably, but we will never know. What we do know is that Hypocrites stood for many of the same ideals as the later Jesus and there would be no reason for the Messiah to denigrate the memory of a man who was in his grave five centuries before.

So, what am I trying to tell you? Basically that the paranormal researcher is hindered by the same roadblocks as any historian; first to understand the lexicon of the period in context and then translate it to a workable form, without losing its overall meaning in the process, while being aware of the possibility of misleading data in the process. For example, if you find a reference at a research site that is about music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and within the text you see the word “jazz” you would immediately call the provenance of the text, simply because jazz did not exist in that

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period. That is an oversimplification, of course, but you get the idea.

Most of the documents you will come across will not be a problem as far as provenance, but the lexicon used will most likely not be familiar to you or easily misconstrued. An example of this would be a 20<sup>th</sup> century text that might say, “He was a gay lad...” which is different than the modern interpretation in the use of the word “Gay.” Know your period of research and be prepared to decipher it in context for that time.; words grow, morph, and change definition routinely, even over the shortest periods of time, so be prepared to work within those parameters.

You might also find the use of period dictionaries, as well as standalone references created to define archaic language useful. Major public libraries and many university libraries will have these reference works and some are still available for sale through used book sellers. There was a series of lexicons created for fiction writers that covered several periods in American history, from pre-revolutionary colonial speak through Civil War and 19<sup>th</sup> century words and phrases, as well as one that covered 20<sup>th</sup> century common phrases and words prior to the Second World War. These were indispensable tools, which are now unfortunately out of print.

The greatest temptation is of course to skip over a word or phrase that you do not understand or take a guess at its meaning. That is a big mistake. Crowe for example uses several phrases that I still have not deciphered and mentions devices that I have not been able to locate in our research, but I nevertheless continue to search for them. While they probably have no consequence or earth shattering significance in our work, one can only really know once we understand them.

Possibly one of the greatest strengths to be found in the membership of the ASUP is our diversity; our members come from a wide variety of personalities and educational backgrounds, which taken as the sum of its parts, is much greater than the whole, therefore communications between the membership is all important and the give and take of information is the key to overall success. You don't need a Ph.D. in linguistics to unravel some of the language we encounter. Camolagize is a common 19<sup>th</sup> century word, most probably born in Great Britain and widely found in old personal letters and texts of that day, but you will have a hard time finding it in the dictionary today. Anyone have a guess?

Well, if you break the word down you have “Camo” (probably of French derivation) from camouflage and “-gize,” as in words like the modern energize. The word as it relates to paranormal investigations is seen in Alsop's volumes on “modern” hauntings (1889), “His intention was to camolagize the spirit...” he reported in reference to a ghost hunters intentions at a castle haunt at which Conan Doyle was also present. Unless you have an 19<sup>th</sup> century sense of humor and a vocabulary to match, you might go off looking for some unique method of dealing with ghosts, but that is not the case.

In this instance, we found the definition purely by luck; an octogenarian relative who almost matter-of-factly informed me that it was a common term, the modern equivalent of pulverize or rip limb from limb, with a slight sense of humor in its common use. “I'll camolagize ya!” It is slang and therefore not in a dictionary, yet widely accepted in its day.

If the truth were to be told, researching by way of reading old texts is one of our greatest, yet least tapped resources in paranormal investigation, but to do it right, you need your text in one

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hand and a good, old dictionary in the other, with ready access to a computer terminal so you can seek a definition not in the dictionary as will. The reference to books with strong bibliography and reference pages is also suggested and when all else fails, ask another researcher for assistance; one man's arcane language is another man's pleasure! But by all means, start to read the old books, often there are hidden clues that will make your present day research easier... remember the objective is not to reinvent the wheel but to improve upon it!