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ON LANGUAGE

## Aha!

**T**HE PROBLEM FACING THE ASSEMBLED editors of The New York Times in early 1977 was brow-furrowing: what kind of column could be created for the front of the Magazine that would seem to be right on top of the news, as if written for the daily paper, but could be written a couple of weeks ahead to conform to the longer lead time of the color-paged Magazine?

A. M. Rosenthal, then merely executive editor (before his elevation to columnist), suddenly remembered that the world's only political lexicographer was on the payroll and snapped his fingers: "Eureka!" he cried, explaining to the others, "That's Greek for 'I've found it.' Safire will do a column about words. Could be sustained for a year, maybe."

That was 18 years ago. My introductory column was about the punctuation of "How do you do" (no question mark required when construed as a statement rather than a question), rather than the etymology of *Eureka!* the exclamation attributed to the Greek scientist Archimedes when he discovered the way to determine the purity of gold.

Forget about *eureka!*; only classicist editors use it in everyday speech. Today, the word breathed when a light bulb goes off in an inventor's head, or when some great insight flashes through a discoverer's mind, is *Aha!*

*Aha!* — an exclamation properly followed by an exclamation mark, that spelling now preferable to *A-hah!* — is one of the great, unappreciated and deliciously nuanced words in the English language.

Chaucer was the first to write it down. In "The Canterbury Tales" (1380's), he wrote: "They crieden, out! . . . A ha the fox! and after him they ran." Shakespeare in 1600 had Hamlet say to Horatio: "Ah, ha! Come, some music." By 1611, the translators of the King James Bible made one word of it in rendering Isaiah 44:16: "He warmeth himself, and saith, *Aha*, I am warm."

But what has the favorite exclamation of palindromists come to mean? A new book by Jordan Ayan is titled "*Aha!*" its heuristic sense found in the subtitle "10 Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas." But *Aha!* does not always mean *eureka!* Robert Young, in his 1936 biblical concordance, found it three times in Ezekiel, transliterated from the Hebrew *hoach*, and defined it with a nice twist: "malicious joy."

That's the "Gochal!" sense, pulsing with savage glee through so many of my correspondents when



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finding me in error. Robert Clarke Brown of New York noted my use of "plunging meteorite" and explained that "a *meteoroid* leaves outer space, plunges through the earth's atmosphere leaving a *meteor* visible in the sky and strikes the earth, becoming a *meteorite*." As he wrote this, catching the language maven in a blatant imprecision, undoubtedly the sly thrill of *Aha!* surged through his mind. (*Aha!* yourself: Isn't *Earth* capitalized when referring to the planet? No, not usually; Mr. Brown is correct in using the lowercase. Ours is the only planet not capitalized, presumably because earthlings are modest. Withdraw my *Aha!*)

That is not the only other sense of this rich exclamation. I can hear, in my mind's ear, the actor Lou Jacobi, in Neil Simon's first play, "Come Blow Your Horn" (1957), saying the word in a combination of triumph and derision. *Aha!* Why not ask Neil Simon himself for his definition? I did.

"*Aha!* So I've been asked to help contribute to your column," replies Mr. Simon. "In this case *Aha!* meaning — A) I am surprised. B) So you finally asked me. C) Wait till I show this to my friends."

"*Aha!* is also stalling for time when someone makes a statement you don't understand but pretend to."

"*Aha!* is also said sarcastically to your daughter when she says she came home at 11:00 last night when you know it was 12:15."

"*Aha!* can be a response," continues the great

playwright-synonymist, "when you know something but find it unnecessary to share, as for example, Sherlock Holmes picking up an object and exclaiming, '*Aha!*' to which Watson asks, 'What is it, Holmes?' 'I'll let you know when we get to Blenheim Castle. Quickly, Watson. To Victoria Station.'"

"*Aha!* can also mean quite simply, when you finally think you know what life is about. And lastly," Simon concludes, "*Aha!* can be the first half of an incompleting sneeze."

### RUN TO DAYLIGHT

Jerry Kramer, Hall of Fame lineman for the Green Bay Packers in the 60's, wrote an Op-Ed column during Super Bowl month about Coach Vince Lombardi that included this sentence: "A series of Nike commercials portray him as a gruff but lovable old coot."

Question: Should it be "series of commercials *portray*" or "*portrays*"?

Answer to this subject-verb agreement conundrum: depends on the writer's "notional concord." If you think of the subject "series" as plural, and especially if you have the plural "commercials" up tight against the verb, then you use the plural *portray*, but if you think of the subject as singular, as primarily a group or collective, then go for the singular *portrays*, as you would with "The World Series is. . ." (I know that leaves the moonings-hungry unsatisfied, but grammatical life is hard.)

Kramer, behind whom the quarterback Bart Starr loved to sneak, went on to quote Lombardi: "You don't do things right once in a while, you do them right all the time."

Time! Question: Should that be a comma or a semicolon after "while"?

I say that sentence contains two independent clauses requiring a semicolon; as it stands, the sentence is joined into a "comma splice," grammar's equivalent of a goal-line fumble.

Sol Steinmetz, the Hall of Fame lexicographer at Random House, disagrees: "Because the emphasis here is on 'once in a while,' a semicolon doesn't fit because it would separate a continuous thought into two ideas. The sentence is punctuated correctly with a comma because there is a parallel between the two independent clauses."

That's what makes linguistic ball games. Go with my call if somebody gives you 14 points. ■