

32 RESPONSE TO MASSIVE
SLOPE FAILURE

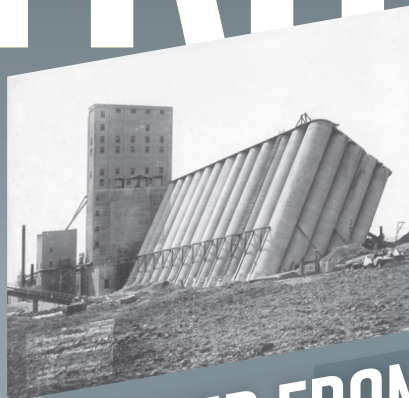
40 BAD INPUT =
BAD OUTPUT

48 PILE DRIVING
FAILURES

54 MOUNT POLLEY MINE
TAILINGS BREACH

GEOSTRATA

MAY // JUNE 2020



LESSONS LEARNED FROM FAILURES



GEO-FORENSICS





The GeoCurmudgeon

Idioms, Phrases, and Words: Misuse Them at Your Own Risk

By John P. Bachner

So there you are at a meeting of a local engineering group, having a beer before the guest speaker begins. You see another member you know — John Doe, PE, chair of the Program Committee — and inquire about the speaker. “Is the guy any good?” you ask. John’s answer is immediate: “Excellent,” he says, adding, “Me and Jill Smith is on the Program Committee.” Me and Jill? Me? Are you serious? And a plural subject (me and Jill) mismatched to a singular verb, “is” instead of “are”? That doesn’t do much to showcase good old John Doe as a professional. After all, society expects professionals to have a pretty thorough knowledge of their own language. Regrettably, many do not, especially so because engineers, geologists, and other geoprofessionals — who write more than just about any other professionals — tend to focus on hard skills, not soft skills, like writing and speaking. Still, most professionals are concerned about their image and don’t want to make obvious mistakes, although all too many do. What about you? Do you make the right choices when it comes to idioms (a word grouping whose meaning goes beyond the meaning of the words themselves, like “raining cats and dogs”), other phrases, and individual words? Consider the following, starting with...

“Hone in on” vs. “Home in on”

The correct expression is “home in on,” as in “homing pigeon.” However, because “hone in on” is used so extensively, even though wrong, some grammarians now say that it is acceptable. To which I say something that’s still somewhat unprintable (in these pages, at least). To say that “hone in on” is correct is the equivalent of saying that, because so many people think $2 + 2 = 5$... GUESS WHAT! Now it is. (I recognize that mathematics is more or less immutable and that language tends to evolve, but evolution that says “that which is wrong now is right” is not evolution: It’s dominion by dummies.)

“I Could Care Less” vs. “I Couldn’t Care Less”

How people confuse these two expressions — actually it’s just one expression, because the other one makes so little sense — I don’t know. Look: If I could care less, then the degree of caring I have for X — whatever or whoever it may be — is probably slight, but it’s not zero, given that there’s room for even less; e.g.,

$100 - 98 = 2$. On the other hand, if I could *not* care less, I am at zero: The extent of my uncaring is so substantial, I couldn’t care less: $100 - 100 = 0$.

“Doggie-dog” vs. “Dog-eat-dog”

“Dog-eat-dog,” as fewer and fewer people seem to know, is an adjectival idiom meaning “with ruthless self-interest,” as in a “dog-eat-dog political primary.” So, imagine my surprise when I read a local-newspaper headline about Shepherdstown, West Virginia’s DogFest, where people bring their dogs downtown, visit vendors’ booths, and such: “Doggie-Dog Days Are Here Again.” WHAT? PARDON ME! WHAT? And not just a few people told me that they, too, had seen that error. Doggie-dog days indeed.

“Chomping at the Bit” vs. “Champing at the Bit”

This is another one of those get-it-wrong-so-much phrases that it now is accepted among those who don’t know better or those who do know better but could care less. Ha ha. To chomp means to bite down hard, so chomping

at the bit is something horses would do... but why? Usually, “to chomp at the bit” is used to indicate someone who is raring to go. While horses may certainly chomp on a bit, it’s not because they’re eager to get started. Maybe it’s because they have a nervous tic or something, or maybe they just like the taste of metal in their mouth: who knows. However, one thing is known: When horses are eager to start a race and have a bit in their mouth, they grind their teeth, a process known as “champing.” They also champ when they are thinking about eating some oats, breakfast of champing ones.

“Baited Breath” vs. “Bated Breath”

Like “champ” when one champs at the bit, “bate,” too, is an older word that’s not much used today. It stems from “abate,” which means to lessen or stop altogether, and — as such — “bated breath” means breath that is held, almost always in anticipation of something, be it good or, as in horror movies, evil. “Baited breath” is, possibly, the smell of a bird’s breath after eating too many worms.

"Butt Naked" vs. "Buck Naked"

No one seems to know where the phrase "buck naked" came from, although a few hypotheses have been advanced. Perhaps that's why "butt naked" has gained such acceptance, because it's obvious what "butt" — not that young a word itself — applies to. Nonetheless, "butt naked" is incorrect, leaving — ta da! — "buck naked" as the phrase to go with. One possible explanation: Native American Indian male youth — young bucks, as it were — used to hunt while nude.

"Card Shark" vs. "Card Sharp"

A "sharp" is someone who is very good at something and uses that talent (in part) to cheat the other guy; thus, a "card sharp" or "pool sharp." As "sharp" fell into disuse, "shark" supplanted it, perhaps because of a shark's furtive and frightening ways. But it's also been advanced that "shark" has nothing to do with our great white, tiger, and hammer-head friends, but rather stems from the German word "schurke," which even as early as the 16th century meant a swindler.

"Tender Hooks" vs. "Tenterhooks"

A tenter is a frame that uses tenterhooks to stretch a piece of cloth for drying. As such, being "on tenterhooks" came to mean to be in a state of tension, anxiety, or suspense. Contemporary English speakers who are unwilling to refer to a dictionary to learn the meaning of "tenter" use common sense instead and interpret what they hear — "tenter hooks" — as "tender hooks," which suggests (to me) a specially designed but nevertheless antique prosthetic hand used for smoothing hair. While inadvertently sitting on three or four of such tender hooks is a possibility, I suppose, I don't understand why doing so would make one anxious. Hmmmm. Then again...

"Literally" vs. "Figuratively"

I have no idea how "literally" got

so messed up. It means "actual" or "without exaggeration." For whatever reason, however, people are using it to mean the exact opposite; i.e., figuratively. As such, "I feel strong enough to literally pull a Conestoga wagon" is wrong, and would be correctly expressed as "I feel strong enough to pull a Conestoga wagon, figuratively, at least."

"Nip in the Butt" vs. "Nip in the Bud"

To "nip in the bud" means to nip a flower or weed in its budding stage, before it has a chance to grow. The concept is similar to preventing "molehills from becoming mountains." To nip something in the butt I guess means to bite it on the butt as a warning that would discourage continued development of something that displeases the biter. Go with "nip in the bud."

"Pawn it off" vs. "Palm it off"

When you pawn something, you get a loan based on specific collateral, usually something like jewelry, or a musical instrument, or something else of reasonable value. That being the case, "pawn off" seems reasonable, although somewhat odd, because it doesn't mean selling something to someone for more than it's actually worth. In fact, the pawn value of something is usually less — sometimes a lot less — than the item's real value. Bottom line: "Pawn off" is the wrong idiom — if it's an idiom at all. The correct phrase is "palm off," because the palm is often used to cheat at cards or to perform card tricks.

"Flush out" vs. "Flesh out"

Both "flush it out" and "flesh it out" are commonly used idioms, but — while their separate meanings are somewhat close — they are not synonymous phrases. "Flush out" is a hunting term, as when dogs are used to "flush out" pheasants from tall grasses. By contrast, "flesh out" means to put meat

on the bones, much as writers do when they start writing based on an outline.

"Beckon Call" vs. "Beck and Call"

To be at someone else's "beck and call" means that you are ready to fulfill that person's command or request. It's easy to understand why people misspell the idiom and turn it into "beckon call," because "beckon" means to do or say something that causes someone else to approach or follow. As such, "beckon call" would mean saying or maybe doing something (the "call") to beckon, which doesn't make much sense, frankly. But it can make a lot more sense than "beck and call" because "beck" is not used much anymore; it was popular about 150 years ago, when the phrase itself was created. What does it — or did it — mean? Beckon. But "beckon call" still is wrong.

"Between You and I" vs. "Between You and Me"

I cannot tell you how many times I've been sitting in a restaurant where I've overheard a speaker at a neighboring table about to share a confidential — and usually negative — opinion and begin the unveiling with, "Between you and me," and then — with much ado — immediately correct it to, "I mean, between you and *I*," as if to evoke the lesson once taught by the speaker's long-dead third-grade English teacher. Look: "Between" is a preposition, like "of," "from," "to," "in," "on," and a host of others, and — without exception — each one takes an object. When the object takes the form of a personal pronoun, the objective form should be used; e.g., "You should throw the ball to me" is correct insofar as "me" is concerned, because "me" is the objective form of the first-person singular version of "I," which is the subjective form. You wouldn't say, "Throw the ball to I," would you? Of course not, which is why "between you and me" is correct and "between you and I" isn't.

"Different than" vs. "Different from"

Depending on the context, it's "different from"; e.g., "The Chevrolet is different from the Cadillac." "Than" would be used when a comparison is involved; e.g., "When it comes to comparing a Rolls Royce to a Cadillac and a Hyundai, the Hyundai is more different than the Cadillac."

"Take a Different Track" vs. "Take a Different Tack"

A tack is a sailing maneuver designed to make progress while sailing into the wind. When following the planned and plotted course is not achievable, a new course — a "different tack" — must be planned and plotted. Those without knowledge of sailing can be nonplussed by a "different tack," but it seems to make sense by assuming that the word heard — or that should have been heard — was "track." Wrong! Compounding the confusion, "tack" can also mean a small nail — a brad — or equipment used to ride a horse, like saddles, stirrups, bridles, halters, reins, and bits.

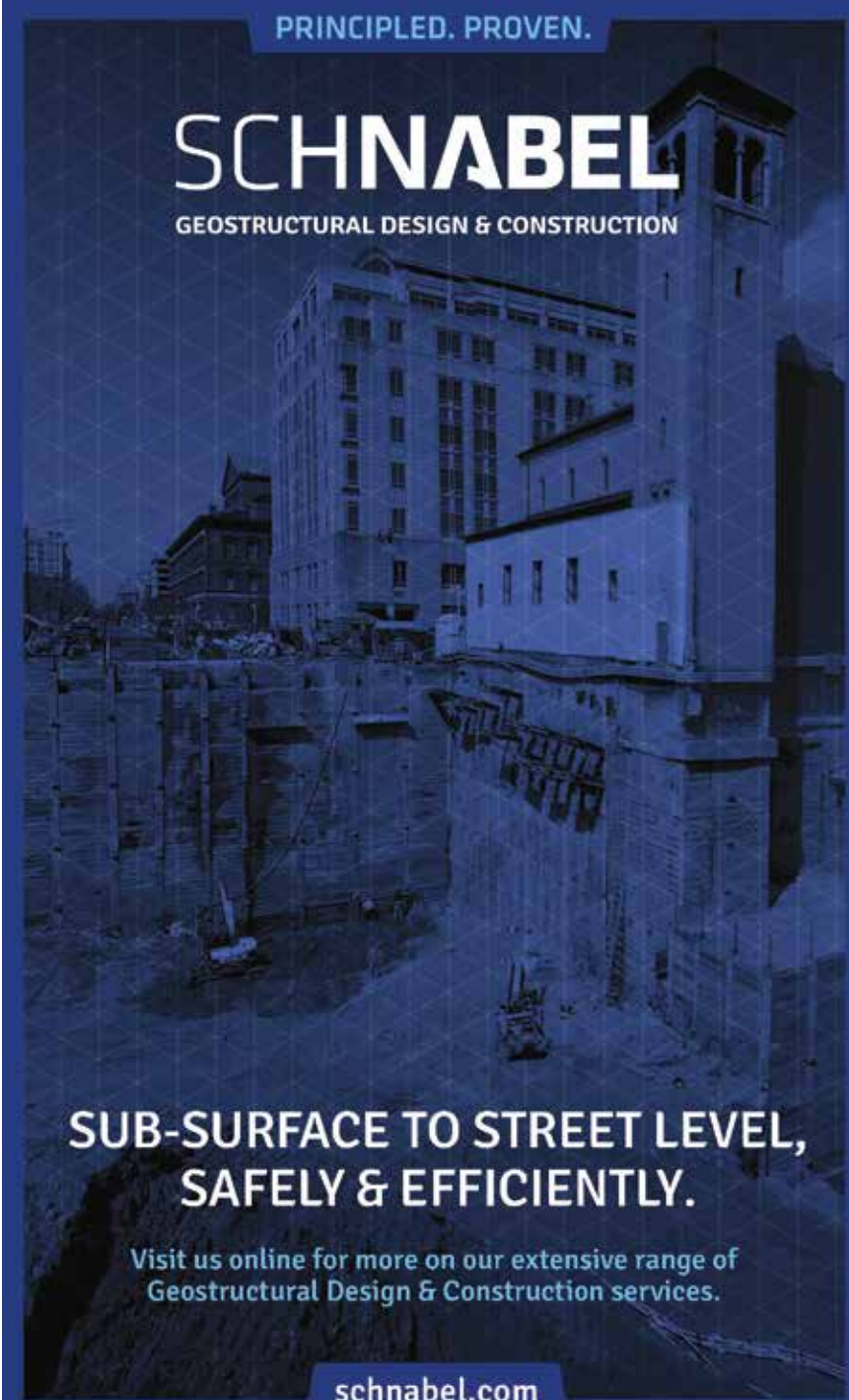
So why do so many people use idioms, phrases, and words mistakenly, making them look foolish and less-than professional in the eyes of some of those who do know better? My answer: **Because they don't read enough.** While technical articles are enlightening, there's more to being regarded as a professional than mastery of issues others do not understand. The real test arises when it comes to the mastery of issues that others *do* understand.

READ! 

► **JOHN PHILIP BACHNER** is an independent consultant who has been working with geoprofessionals since 1969. He is the author of more than 250 books, manuals, and guides, many of which he's focused on professional-liability-loss prevention. He is the author and presenter of "Write Right," "Hassle-Free Selling for Project Managers," and other "BackYard Seminars"

he has created and presented to some 50,000 geoprofessionals. He is also the creator and staff leader of *Fundamentals of Professional Practice*, a renowned, six-month educational program that boasts more than 2,000 geoprofessional alumni,

some 150 or more of whom are today the CEOs of the firms that sent them through the course years before. Members of ASCE and the Geo-Institute of ASCE receive a \$1,000 discount on FOPP tuition. Contact John at john@bachner.com.



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