

Pounding out signs and symbols

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#

Pundits curse, scholars decry, poets lament, and English teachers critique the corruption of language in 21st Century America. Some crimes are grammatical: apostrophes used for plurals, commas to signify pauses rather to conjoin or disjoin, “like”s as another kind of pause or modifier. Other corruptions stem from the brevity and carelessness associated with sending written language on a device originally designed for spoken: “I’m all thumbs” used to be an admission of clumsiness, now it suggests quick (if not necessarily accurate or complete) typing. Corruption may have no limit. Some of the most debased characteristics are symbolic.

Consider, for example, the symbol constructed with two parallel, nearly vertical, lines (line segments, to be precise) and two parallel horizontal lines, a tic-tac-toe board whose top tilts toward the right, a quadrilateral drawn with too-long lines, that is, the “#” symbol.

The # symbol has enough aliases that some suspect that it has a shady past. I first learned to call it “pound”, like the Imperial currency,* but more frequently aligned with a different type of Imperial measurement.† Many call it “mesh”, perhaps because it looks like one. That term also calls to mind an act of joining, making things mesh together. It’s also a “hash”, an Imperial verb that suggests chopping things up and then joining them back together,

* The terms “pound” and “pound sign” may also refer to the £ symbol, which provides a sense of balance.

† One likely explanation for the evolution of the pound sign begins with the Latin *libra pondo*, which was soon abbreviated as lb with a line through the top (**lb**). Through the powers of scribal efficiency—or perhaps scribal sloppiness—the complex glyph evolved into the # sign that we now know and love.

also a hash, this time a noun. My favorite name echoes from the resonant chambers of Bell Labs, which called it an “octothorpe”,[‡] surprisingly lyrical for such a technical place and for the symbol’s mundane use at the lower-right corner of a touch-tone keypad.[§] The appellation may bring to mind some eight-limbed, athletic creature, well prepared to compete in a triathalon, pentathlon, or their sum, the octathalon. Speaking of the number eight, the # symbol is also called “number sign” or just “number”, as in “We’re #1!” or “We’re #2, but we try harder.”

Members of the evil empire of Redmond** refer to # as “sharp” but are clearly confused in their symbology. In the hash, pound, mesh, number, octothorpe, or tilted-tic-tac-toe symbol (#), the horizontal lines are, well, horizontal, and the vertical lines have the same baseline. In the traditional sharp symbol (♯), the non-vertical lines angle upward and the bases of the vertical lines are offset vertically. We shall ignore this Microsharp misnomer.

These days, many people call the # sign “hashtag”.^{††} They are wrong.^{‡‡} The # symbol is not, itself, a hashtag. Rather, a hashtag is the textual unit formed by a # symbol and a sequence of alphanumeric characters, presumably including at least one alphabetic character. The #

[‡] Although the Bell Labs Engineers carefully documented the schematics and design of the touch-tone phone in their now-archived laboratory notebooks, they neglected to document the origin of the term “octothorpe”. Nonetheless, the resemblance of that sign to the cartographic symbol used for a town or building surrounded by eight fields (“thorpes”, in Old English) provides one clear etymology or symology.

[§] That context almost certainly suggests that the Ma Bell’s progeny intended it as a number symbol.

** Microsoft.

^{††} When you read the “#” in the text to yourself, what did you hear?

^{‡‡} If you read it as “hashtag”, you, too, are wrong. Perhaps you should follow the lead of the legendary Victor Borge in the extended version of his Phonetic Punctuation sketch, and recite it with four “phssshhh” sounds, each a variant of the sound of the top portion of the exclamation point.

symbol should only be called “hashtag” when conjoined with the sequence that makes a hashtag. You wouldn’t say “We’re hashtag two, but we try harder!” At least I wouldn’t. But the problem is worse than the misnomer. Unlike many of the other terms, which reveal an imaginative mind, “hashtag” is plain, purely descriptive of but a single use of the sign.

##

For those who live under a rock or in rock houses on small, hand-maintainable farms and for those who embrace an approach to technology espoused by a poet whose name calls to mind a small fruit produced by the ovary of a single flower, hashtags appear to have originated on a platform^{§§} called “Twitter”,^{***} but have since spread to other platforms, such as Facebook⁺⁺⁺ and Instagram.⁺⁺⁺

The simplicity of these hashtag digilexemes themselves leads to a significant loss, a loss of subtlety, a loss of nuance, a loss of language. Like their name, hashtags are explicit, direct, unambiguous: #ShelterInPlace, #NoLivesMatter, #Parliament, #Beautiful, #RemoteLearning,

^{§§} *Platform (n)*. 1. A raised level surface on which people or things can stand. 2. The declared policy of a political party or group. 3. An operating system or other piece of software that supports certain kinds of activities on the computer. See also *Soapbox*. As you might guess from the context, social media platforms fall under definition 4. Some claim that definition 2 relates to their use by the alt-right.

^{***} *Twitter (n)*. 1. A series of short, high-pitched, calls or sounds. 2. A social-media platform through which people or organizations can publish short pieces of information, and where others can see those published pieces.

⁺⁺⁺ Facebook, originally TheFacebook, was designed as a platform for members of the elite to engage in misogynistic practices. It has since grown into a platform that not only democratizes its original intent but also provides a host of additional services such as serving necessary advertisements, sharing photographs of offspring and other pets, gathering detailed information about citizens, and manipulating elections.

⁺⁺⁺ You can find explanations of Instagram at www.google.com/search?q=Instagram or www.instagram.com.

#Boring, #Zoom. Where are the signifiers, the symbolism, the imaginative language, the metaphors, the similes, the carefully chosen words, the flourish? Where is, for lack of a better term, the *craft*?

###

It didn't have to be this way. Before it became a haven for the alt right, before, even, that legendary Spring when it brought forth revolutions, Twitter was a simple thing, lacking most modern conveniences. You could post and read messages, similar to SMS (Simple Messaging Service) messages. There were no hashtags. There were no user callouts. Just letters, numbers, spaces, and punctuation. There were no emojis, just emoticons that you could construct with the aforementioned letters, numbers, spaces, and punctuation, such as “(-;”.^{§§§} That doesn't mean that you couldn't use octothorpes or at signs^{****} (@). But they had no special meanings.

Strangely enough, hashtags and callouts were both invented in 2007, initially as conventions, then as features with underlying software support. User callouts came first. Records from that distant time are lamentedly spotty. Fortunately, some have been preserved, Fortunately, some have been preserved and suggest that callouts derive from an archaic social media platform known as Plans.⁺⁺⁺⁺

^{§§§} The interpretation of “(-;” and its relation to “;-)” are left as exercises for the reader.

^{****} More precisely, @ grammalogues.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ Plans was first developed at ~~Cornell~~ Grinnell College in the early 1990's, a time in which all students and faculty had accounts on a single VAX computer running the VMS operating system. VMS had a feature, likely drawn from the Unix operating system (invented at Bell labs and also available on VAXen), in which users could create “plan.txt” files and other readers could read those files by using the metaphorically rich “finger” command. Students regularly updated their “plans”. Some plans were short, a few notes on what was happening that day or

Subject: @name in Twitter

From: Tony Stubblebine <tony@XXXXX.com>

Date: Thu, Mar 1, 2007 at 3:05 PM

To: Jack Dorsey <jackjack@XXXXX.com>, Evan Williams <ev@XXXXX.com>, Biz Stone <biz@XXXXX.com>

I've heard a couple people asking for the @name unofficial syntax to be an alias for the direct send feature. Nonsense. I'd rather that it just get turned into a link to that person's account.

I'm not sure if you guys remember the online plans community I showed you from Grinnell college. The most popular feature was referencing people by [name] and then checking to see who was referencing you. They called the feature "quick love" and every person's first stop after logging in is the quick love page where they can see who has referenced them (i.e. left them "plan love"). I think the same dynamic would work for Twitter and

that week, a quotation with meaning, a rant about an event on campus, a ProfQuote or two. Others grew and grew and grew, seemingly without limit. Checking other people's plans became an obsession for some. Students quickly developed software to support these uses. A "newlove" script allowed you to identify plans that had changed since you had read them last. A search feature allowed you to identify which plans used particular terms.

A custom arose—one still in use today, long after the decommissioning or decomposition of the VAX)—of referring to account names by surrounding them with square brackets. A clever student quickly realized that they could adapt the search feature to allow users to identify which plans mentioned them. And so "quicklove" was born, as was the act of "giving plan love". Other customs also arose, such as the use of parentheses to indicate hugs, often in response to personal distress. History is silent about equivalents of the dreaded hashtag. Members of the Plans community employed its features in many ways. Mark Root-Wiley, in an anthropological study, quotes a user describing a common plans practice.

I love playing the 'follow the PlanLove' [sic] game in which you use random plan to find the plan of someone you know. You look at their plan love and is [sic] there is no one you know plan loved then you click the first one and continue this untill [sic] you find plan love for someone you know or hit a dead plan (at which point you lose). Great for procrastinating but more importantly it rearely [sic] takes more than 3-4 plans before I come upon plan love for a relitively [sic] close friend. It shows hoe [sic] tight knit the Grinnell community is.

With the advent of personal computers, usage of the VAX rapidly decreased. Most Grinnellians used it only for plans. The advent of the World-Wide Web, along with faculty willing to teach Web development techniques, led a series of students to develop a Web-based version of plans (more precisely, a sequence of Web-based versions). These new versions preserved all of the features (quicklove, newlove, an emphasis on text rather than image, a sense of community, the ability to write way too much, support for individualistic approaches) and added a bit more (links, formatting). Further history is available In the *Lost Gospel*, long attributed to the legendary floral vintner Jack the Druid, a witness to these events. Please refer to www.grinnellplans.com for further information.

lead to the same kind of effects that Blogs get from link love.

--tony

"Digging @AdamRugal's 71Miles"

From: Biz Stone <biz@XXXXX.com>

Date: Thu, Mar 1, 2007 at 5:42 PM

To: Tony Stubblebine <tony@XXXXX.com>

Cc: Jack Dorsey <jackjack@XXXXX.com>, Evan Williams <ev@XXXXX.com>

Interesting idea! "Who's been twittering about me?" Could be fun.

Biz

Facebook's callouts, unlike hashtags, do not corrupt. A name by any other name is still a name.

####

Hashtags didn't have to corrupt. Chris Messina's original plan was simpler, just a way to group relevant Tweets for a community, such as those by people at a conference.^{###} The expanded use of these conversation markers caused problems, the decision—conscious or unconscious—to make a hash of words that aren't intended to create communities, that don't need to be pounded into oblivion, that are concrete rather than abstract, that don't form a mesh of meanings, that count our way forward to nowhere. If the #'s been used as intended, the Twits probably wouldn't have even called them "hashtags". Can we^{§§§§} return to a better time, a time when hashtags were only for assembling groups, and language was richer? I expect not.^{*****}

Oh well. At least we have emojis.

^{###} The full details are in the original prospectus for hashtags, still available at <https://bit.ly/twitter-tags>.

^{§§§§} R. Savarese challenged me to limit the use of the first person in this manuscript. I wonder how many of the prior uses he marked up.

^{*****} In any case, I'm about to run out of my allotted space and therefore have no room to suggest a way forward (or backward).

n.b. The following is not strictly part of the manuscript. It is included for those who want a more lyrical approach to the history of Plans. (Okay, it's really included because I can't bear to throw things away, but there wasn't really room for it.)

The Lost Gospel of Jack The Druid

Found on [RoseJ]'s plan.

Chapter 1

[1] In the beginning there was VAX. And VAX brought man out of the darkness of time, to place him in dimly-lit structures, pecking away on keyboards, staring at monochromatic screens.

[2] And the VAXgods, in their infinite wisdom, created Dreams. And the greater part of the multitude were satisfied. But other users were unhappy, and a great cry went up in the lands, "We wish to express ourselves!" And there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

[3] So VAXgods discovered the Plans function hidden within the labyrinth that was VAX, and the people rejoiced! "No longer must we simply pour out emotions in the dining halls! We have an outlet for all time!" And the whole of the people were satisfied.

[4] But a time came when the people turned their backs on VAX, and began worshipping the false idol, Gates. And many bowed to the Golden Windows logo, neglecting the VAX in their blasphemous rituals.

[5] And the VAXgods were angered, and they dashed the VAX upon the side of Mt. Darby, crying "You fools! You know not what you do!" And the VAX's final words were, "Love her...as I loved her." And the great multitude puzzled over these words, for they knew not what they meant. But then there was great wailing and gnashing of teeth in the lands, for the people knew not what had befallen them.

Chapter 2

[1] A great darkness settled over the land, with the followers of Gates harrassing those followers of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Great suffering was seen throughout the world, with no way for people to express themselves. Some resorted to knitting.

[2] At this time, a great plague of webmail descended upon the earth, and there was even more wailing and gnashing of teeth than ever before. And the people cried out, "Oh mighty GCCS, err...ITS, What have we done to deserve this?" But GCCS was silent, and no answers came forth from the darkened doorway in Mt. Darby.

[3] But soon after, a prophet arrived from the land of MathLAN, and her name was [[heckr](#)]! And she said, Let there be Plans once more in the land! Thus she spake, and lo! after 6 days and 6 nights of hard

coding, Plans were brought forth into the Garden of Grinnell to multiply.

[4] And on the seventh day [[heckr](#)] rested, and answered hundreds of e-mails from Grinnellians, all telling her exactly what she knew already. And on the eighth day, she fixed the code, and it was good.

[5] There were those who spoke false words against the prophet, but these fell on deaf ears. For the people knew that [[heckr](#)] was a true prophet of the Internet, and that she spoke not falsely.

[6] And throughout the world the people did rejoice, with great celebrations throughout the land. And neighbor introduced neighbor, and strangers from far off lands greeted one another. And the world was better off than before.