

Verbum sapienti

Language is an instrument for communication. The language which can, with the greatest ease, make the finest and most numerous distinctions of meaning is the best.
C.S. Lewis

Verbum sapienti – “a word to the wise” – is intended to be an occasional contribution on the use of words and language, especially in relationship to medicine and medical writers. Contributions from readers will be welcome.

English is perhaps the most flexible language in the world. Thousands of new words are added to each new edition of the Oxford English Dictionary by its compiler on the basis that they have ceased to be ephemeral and are now in firmly established conversational and written use. One could perhaps argue that the compiler should lead and inform rather than follow practice in the community, but that is a different issue. Such changes in the language have ensured the survival of English as a living language. The French have favoured a different approach in that attempts are made to prevent contamination of their language by foreign words and phrases such as “le weekend” & “le football”. This is all entirely understandable, but the effect of introducing new words to English with subtle nuances of meaning makes communication more specific; it is likely that the translation of an English article into one of the Romance languages will also increase its length by perhaps 20 percent. Consequently, as so many new words are added officially (and I suppose one can refer to the OED as official), I find it depressing that authors make up new words unnecessarily. I suppose, for the lazy person, it is easier to coin a neologism than to find an equivalent word that everyone understands. As Bernard Freedman wrote in 1987 “I look askance at the introduction of new words, when there are entirely satisfactory ones already in existence”.

Colloquial terms are not welcome in scientific journals. We should not write “blow-up” for photographic enlargement, “hold-up” for obstruction or “see-through” for transparent.

I am by no means blameless; as an editor, scarcely a month goes by without my challenging a word in an article only to find that the author is correct and the word means specifically what he intended, and not what I thought it meant! Are there those who can exist without a good thesaurus?

Dennis Stoker