

Eating Our Words

by Mary Jackson (April 2010)

before that the word “plight” has become devalued by its association with the “Palestinians”. Their “plight” consists in not suffering the consequences of their own actions and of Islam, cushioned as they are by Western largesse. A recent piece at [Pajamasmedia](#) has the tagline: “The plight of the Uighurs is beginning to inflame Muslim populations”. That does it for me and “plight” – it is but another tool in the arsenal of combustible Muslims.

“Plight”, it has been nice knowing you, but I will never use you again, at least not as a noun. But there is another use: as a verb in the formula “plight one’s troth”. This raises the question – it [certainly doesn’t beg it](#) – of whether you can plight anything other than a troth. If any readers have plighted other things, please let me know.

The plighting of troths, and the absence of other known plightables, came up in [The Times](#) recently. Plight is what Sally Baker and others call a single context word, and it is not the only one. For example, is anything ever “in kilter”, or must things always be out of it?

“Can one gird anything other than one’s loins?” asks a reader. “Indeed, can one do anything with one’s loins except gird them?” A fair, [unbeggable](#) question. Another thing – can shrift be anything other than short? And can you have a bit of truck with someone, or is truck something you must always have none of?

Here are some more, from another column in [The Times](#) by the same author.

The Feedback campaign to save our single-context words from English extinction (new readers, start here: to hull strawberries, to shuck oysters) has taken off so magnificently that I'm thinking of buying a campaign bus to take round Britain and rally more support, although I'm not sure if it's OK to put a whole bus on expenses.

First, a few items from last week. Victoria Solt Dennis (among others) confirms that to don and doff (clothing) are indeed related to on and off: "They are elisions of 'do on' and 'do off'. We also used to dout (do out, ie, put out) candles, and dup (do up, ie, lift) door latches. Talking of candles, can you snuff anything else (except *it*, of course)?"

Several of you also referred to the textile industry, including Ian Calderbank: "In the early 1970s I went on a date with a young lady and the conversation turned to our respective employments. In response to 'And what do you do?' she replied 'I doff', and went on to explain that she took the full bobbins off and put empty ones on. She was a doffer. As our last textile businesses close, I guess there aren't many doffers left."

I disagree – you can doff your hat. Remember [this](#) from the inimitable Two Ronnies?

As Bold Sir John walked on afar,
He spied a maiden fair;
"I beg you sir don't come too near,
For I've seen many a maiden here;
Get lost amongst the new mown hay,
So doff your hat I pray".
Get lost! Get lost! Get lost! Get lost!
Get lost amongst the new mown hay.
Sod off! Sod off! Sod off! Sod off!
So doff your hat I pray.

Baker concludes with what she describes as "the most singular single-context word":

"Taghairm: (in the Scottish Highlands) divination, especially inspiration sought by lying in a bullock's hide behind a waterfall." Oh, come on, Anne, there must be lots of words for that.

Alice's pudding, once rudely cut, it never recovered.

If you have tracked down any more English gerundives, please click